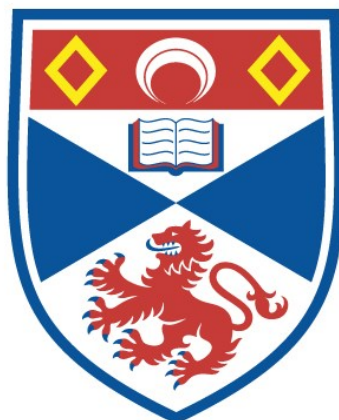


‘POST-SOVIET NEO-MODERNISM’: AN APPROACH TO  
‘POSTMODERNISM’ AND HUMOUR IN THE POST-SOVIET  
RUSSIAN FICTION OF VLADIMIR SOROKIN, VLADIMIR  
TUCHKOV AND ALEKSANDR KHURGIN

Nicolas Dreyer

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD  
at the  
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University of St Andrews

‘Post-Soviet Neo-Modernism’:

An Approach to ‘Postmodernism’ and Humour in the  
Post-Soviet Russian Fiction of Vladimir Sorokin,  
Vladimir Tuchkov and Aleksandr Khurgin

Nicolas Dreyer

A dissertation submitted to the University of St Andrews in  
accordance with the requirements of the degree of Doctor of  
Philosophy in the Faculty of Arts, Department of Russian

19 May 2011

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I, Nicolas Dreyer, hereby certify that this thesis, which is approximately 80,000 words in length, has been written by me, that it is the record of work carried out by me and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree.

I was admitted as a research student in September 2006 and as a candidate for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in September 2007; the higher study for which this is a record was carried out in the University of St Andrews between 2006 and 2011.

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I, Nicolas Dreyer, received assistance at various stages in the writing of various parts of this thesis in respect of language, grammar, spelling and syntax, which was provided by Ms. Joy Frye, Dr. Albert Lukaszewski and Mr. Roger Hurford.

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## **Abstract**

The present work analyses the fiction of the post-Soviet Russian writers Vladimir Sorokin, Vladimir Tuchkov and Aleksandr Khurgin against the background of the notion of post-Soviet Russian postmodernism. In doing so, it investigates the usefulness and accuracy of this very notion, proposing that of ‘post-Soviet neo-modernism’ instead. Common critical approaches to post-Soviet Russian literature as being postmodern are questioned through an examination of the concept of postmodernism in its interrelated historical, social, and philosophical dimensions, and of its utility and adequacy in the Russian cultural context. In addition, it is proposed that the humorous and grotesque nature of certain post-Soviet works can be viewed as a creatively critical engagement with both the past, i.e. Soviet ideology, and the present, the socially tumultuous post-Soviet years.

Russian modernism, while sharing typologically and literary-historically a number of key characteristics with Western modernism, was particularly motivated by a turning to the cultural repository of Russia’s past, and a metaphysical yearning for universal meaning transcending the perceived fragmentation of the tangible modern world. Continuing the older Russian tradition of resisting rationalism, and impressed by the sense of realist aesthetics failing the writer in the task of representing a world that eluded rational comprehension, modernists tended to subordinate artistic concerns to their esoteric convictions. Without appreciation of this spiritual dimension, semantic intention in Russian modernist fiction may escape a reader used to the conventions of realist fiction. It is suggested that contemporary Russian fiction as embodied in certain works by Sorokin, Tuchkov and Khurgin, while

stylistically exhibiting a number of features commonly regarded as postmodern, such as parody, pastiche, playfulness, carnivalisation, the grotesque, intertextuality and self-consciousness, seems to resume modernism's tendency to seek meaning and value for human existence in the transcendent realm, as well as in the cultural, in particular literary, treasures of the past. The closeness of such segments of post-Soviet fiction and modernism in this regard is, it is argued, ultimately contrary to the spirit of postmodernism and its relativistic and particularistic worldview. Hence the suggested conceptualisation of post-Soviet Russian fiction as 'neo-modernist'.

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Every proverb, every book, every byword that belongs to thee for aid and comfort shall surely come home through open and winding passages. Every friend whom not thy fantastic will, but the great and tender soul in thee craveth, shall lock thee in his embrace.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>*Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson With a New Introduction by Charles Johnson*, ed. by William H. Gilman (New York, London, Camberwell *et al.*: Signet, 2003), p. 309.

# Notes on Style, Transliteration and Translation

In general, this dissertation follows the simplified version of the Library of Congress system of transliteration, except for cases where the *MHRA Style Guide*<sup>2</sup> explicitly stipulates a divergent transliteration, e.g. regarding the surnames of Fedor Dostoevsky, Lev Tolstoy and Maksim Gor'ky. However, where another writer with the same surname, e.g. Aleksei Tolstoi, is concerned, I retain the Library of Congress system. I have opted to preserve the soft sign or prime ('), including in names.

As a rule, quotations from Russian texts, whether primary or secondary ones, are quoted in English translation where they are part of my own discourse, whereas they are quoted in the original Cyrillic where the texts from which they are taken are themselves the focus of discussion, whether for stylistic, thematic or other reasons. Quotations from German texts have been translated into English, whereas I have left French quotations in the original.

Concerning the common designations for literary-historical periods and 'schools', I have opted for their lower case variants, such as romanticism,

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<sup>2</sup>*MHRA Style Guide: A Handbook for Authors, Editors, and Writers of Theses*, 2nd edn (London: Modern Humanities Research Association, 2008).

sentimentalism, realism, modernism, socialist realism, postmodernism, and conceptualism. This is done in the light of the fact that lower-case terms are less pretentious and less prone than their higher case cousins to imply a self-awareness of the respective writers as belonging to the given period or school. Furthermore, given that this dissertation focusses on shared typological and philosophical tendencies and continuities, lower case designations appear to be less likely to suggest the possibility of readily ascertainable literary-historical and typological delineation. Where I quote other critics, I normally preserve their upper and lower case designations, however.

Occasional quotations from the Bible are taken from the *Authorized Version* (AV) and the *New International Version* (NIV), as indicated.

To my parents Klaus and Gisela and my sister Eva

Moe: It's po-mo! [blank stares from all]  
Post-modern! [more staring]  
Yeah, all right — weird for the sake of weird.  
Guys: Oooh!

— *The Simpsons*<sup>3</sup>

The mind must be free to leave traditional thoroughfares, to go unhampered by the restrictions of received signposts to the neglected backwaters, the quiet by-ways, to gather seemingly unrelated impressions and sensations, and to allow them to fall into varied combinations until new relationships and patterns emerge.

— Peter Loewenberg<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>*The Simpsons*, Season 13, Episode 3 ('Homer the Moe'), directed by Jen Kamerman <<http://www.snpp.com/episodes/CABF20>> [accessed 7 June 2009].

<sup>4</sup>Peter Loewenberg, *Decoding the Past: The Psychohistorical Approach* (New Brunswick, NJ, and London: Transaction Publishers, 1996), pp. 64–65.



# Introduction

*Is there any post-Soviet literature?*

— A Russian interlocutor<sup>1</sup>

Russian literature has undergone fundamental social and structural change since *perestroika* and the end of communism. The falling away of approved themes and styles has rendered anti-establishment literature superfluous. Freedom of speech and of the press has supplemented political and economic freedom and opened up sweeping possibilities for thematic and formal creativity. New genres have emerged which had not been tolerated in the Soviet period, epitomised by so-called *massolit*, mass literature, with its focus on crime, sex, horror and fantasy, as well as by *khudozhestvennaia literatura*, more ‘high-brow’ literature which dealt realistically with the Soviet past or with human issues of more general relevance which had not been officially recognised in relation to *homo sovieticus*. Such issues included sexuality, religion, illness, alcoholism, and death. The new freedom enabled writers to resort to forms, concepts and techniques which had formerly been decried as ‘decadent’ or ‘formalistic’, and styles which have often been referred to as ‘postmodern’.<sup>2</sup> The post-Soviet Russian literary landscape has, therefore,

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<sup>1</sup>Private conversation with a native Russian on 25 September 2010.

<sup>2</sup>Generally, the term ‘postmodernism’ and its adjective is presented in inverted commas in order to highlight that the application of this concept in the respective context may

become very diverse, as manifested in the co-existence of different traditions — realism, village prose, modernism, conceptualism and postmodernism — to refer to ‘high’ literature only. The presence of opposing camps of writers and journals (‘liberal’ and ‘patriotic’) further attests to such pluralism.<sup>3</sup> Alla Latynina and Martin Dewhirst rightly stated in 1998 that this is a ‘landscape that is blurred and fuzzy, sadly lacking in harmony and charm’.<sup>4</sup> The Swiss scholar Felix Ingold similarly spoke of a ‘stylistic and thematic syncretism’ when discussing the post-Soviet literary situation.<sup>5</sup> An important side-effect of this literary pluralism is the debatable nature and status of some contemporary Russian literature itself and of the various attempts that have been made to classify it as ‘postmodern’, or as ‘interim’ literature, or even as Russia’s very own ‘*Fleurs du mal*’.<sup>6</sup>

A range of issues make the study of contemporary,<sup>7</sup> post-Soviet and ‘post-  


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be questionable. The term is used without inverted commas when our discourse does not take issue with its use and suitability, however.

<sup>3</sup>Alla Latynina and Martin Dewhirst, ‘Russian Literature in the Post-Soviet Period’, *Reference Guide to Russian Literature*, ed. by Neil Cornwell (London and Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1998), pp. 64–69; Felix Philipp Ingold, ‘Nachgeholte Postmoderne: Russische Gegenwartsliteratur zwischen Imitation und Eigensinn’, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 4 October 2003, pp. 67–68; N. N. Shneidman, *Russian Literature 1995–2002: On the Threshold of the New Millennium* (Toronto, Buffalo and London: Toronto University Press, 2004), pp. 3–19.

<sup>4</sup>Latynina and Dewhirst, p. 67.

<sup>5</sup>Ingold, p. 67.

<sup>6</sup>Viktor Erofeev, *Russkie tsvety zla. Rodnaia proza kontsa XX veka: luchshie pisateli* (Moscow: Podkova, 1997).

<sup>7</sup>For the sake of variation, the word ‘contemporary’ is used in the present work, and taken to be largely synonymous with ‘post-Soviet’. A few works to be discussed stem from the *perestroika* years, which is why these years are generously included in our definition of both terms. The period under consideration stretches from the last years of the Soviet Union into the second decade of the twenty-first century, therefore. Most of our attention

modern' Russian literature problematic, therefore, as is already shown in the use of different terms and concepts by the authors of the two surveys just cited, both of which attempt to conceptualise post-Soviet literary phenomena. The issue is also reflected in the fact that post-Soviet Russian literature is often described as 'new', 'other' or 'transient', revealing the difficulties which critics have when dealing with the contemporary period. If something is 'new' or 'other' it is frequently thought to elude immediate understanding.

One reason why post-Soviet Russian literature is difficult to approach theoretically is its syncretist nature, something linked to problems of terminology, definition and theoretical approaches to postmodernism. This has led to a situation where scholars may seem to be speaking about the same issues but, beneath the surface, they in fact possess fundamentally different understandings of them. Hence, conceptual problems appear to permeate the entire debate about contemporary Russian literature. A Western observer, Norman Shneidman, has written that

[t]he theoretical substantiation of most literary terms [used to describe post-Soviet literature], however, in particular Russian postmodernism, is so vague and contradictory that it is often difficult to determine whether a writer is a realist, a postmodernist, an adherent of the avant-garde, or of conceptualism, or of all of the above mixed together.<sup>8</sup>

Our own analysis of scholarly literature on this subject will be seen to support Shneidman's observations. While the arguments of scholars with respect to Russian postmodernism reveal a number of important conceptual overlaps, they also reveal fundamental disagreements.

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will focus on works written and published during the 1990s, however.

<sup>8</sup>Shneidman, *Russian Literature 1995–2002*, p. 16.

A starting point for approaching the problem would be to investigate the common ground. Many scholars agree that Russian literary postmodernism:

- is a real phenomenon, irrespective of whether it is ‘good’ or ‘bad’, while some take issue with its perceived moral temper.<sup>9</sup>
- enjoys some kind of relationship to Western philosophical and literary postmodernism.<sup>10</sup>
- should be viewed as an authentic, immanent and indigenous Russian cultural and literary development, going back to the literary underground of the 1950s and 1960s, and ultimately to Daniil Kharmis and the preceding ‘Silver Age’.<sup>11</sup> Vladimir Nabokov has also been referred

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<sup>9</sup>Erofeev, *Russkie tsvety zla*; Natal’ia Ivanova, ‘Preodolevshie postmodernizm’, *Znamia*, 1998.4, 193–204; Viacheslav Kupriianov, ‘Nechto nichto, ili snova o postmodernizme’, *Novyi mir*, 1997.10, 237–241; Sergei Reingol’d, ‘Russkaia literatura i postmodernizm: nesluchainye itogi novatsii 90-kh godov. Esse’, *Znamia*, 1998.9, 209–220.

<sup>10</sup>O. V. Bogdanova, ‘Postmodernizm: k istorii iavleniia i ego organichnosti sovremennomu russkomu literaturnomu protsessu’, *Vestnik Sankt-Peterburgskogo Universiteta. Seriia 2: istoriia, iazykoznanie, literaturovedenie*. Vypusk 2 (no. 10), 2003.4, 73–88; M. G. Chistiakova, ‘Homo postmodernus i ego otnoshenie k miru’, 13–18, and I. S. Skoropanova, ‘Tipologiiia russkoi postmodernistskoi literatury’, 7–13, in *Postmodernizm: pro et contra (Materialy Mezhdunarodnoi nauchnoi konferentsii ‘Postmodernizm i sud’by khudozhestvennoi slovesnosti na rubezhe tysiacheletii’)*, ed. by N. P. Dvortsova, (Tiumen’: Vektor Buk, 2002); Raoul Eshelman, *Early Soviet Postmodernism* (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1997), pp. 10–12, 21; Mikhail Golubkov, ‘Russkii postmodernizm: nachala i kontsy’, *Literaturnaia ucheba*, 2003.11/12, 71–92 (p. 73); Mark Lipovetsky, *Russian Postmodernist Fiction: Dialogue with Chaos*, ed. by Eliot Borenstein (New York and London: Sharpe, 1999), pp. 4–5.

<sup>11</sup>Bogdanova, ‘Postmodernizm: k istorii iavleniia’; Golubkov, ‘Russkii postmodernizm: nachala i kontsy’; A. S. Karpov, ‘Russkii postmodernizm v otechestvennoi nauke o literature’, *Filologicheskie nauki*, 2002.1, 12–20.

to by scholars as paving the way for Russian postmodernism.<sup>12</sup>

- lives in a delicate relationship with Russian modernism, avant-garde,<sup>13</sup> and socialist realism.<sup>14</sup>

Such general observations, however, become less accurate when the focus switches to detailed analysis, since all too often these general assumptions are taken for granted. Only occasionally is an effort made to define and delineate the relationships in question and to ground these theoretically. For example, the tension between Russian postmodernism as a distinctly Soviet

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<sup>12</sup>Lipovetsky, *Dialogue with Chaos*, pp. 8–10.

<sup>13</sup>Avant-garde is identified here as the ‘revolutionary avant-garde’ including writers and movements such as *Proletkul't*, the members of *RAPP*, imaginism, *LEF*, constructivism, and the Serapion Brothers. The avant-garde is sometimes differentiated from modernism through its revolutionary spirit and interest in the transformation of society [cf. Graham Roberts, *The Last Soviet Avant-garde: OBERIU — Fact, Fiction, Metafiction* (Cambridge, New York and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 179, and Charles Russell, *Poets, Prophets, and Revolutionaries: The Literary Avant-Garde from Rimbaud through Postmodernism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992)]. However, as will be considered in Chapter 3, the present work avoids the term avant-garde, owing to the fact that its application is often ahistorical and bereft of precision.

<sup>14</sup>L. P. Egorova, ‘Postmodernizm v iskusstve i deistvitel'nosti’, *Russkii postmodernizm/materialy mezhvuzovskoi nauchnoi konferentsii/bibliograficheskii ukazatel'*, ed. by L. P. Egorova (Stavropol': Stavropol'skii Gosudarstvennyi Universitet, 1999), 6–15; Mikhail N. Epstein, *After the Future: The Paradoxes of Postmodernism and Contemporary Culture*, transl. by Anesa Miller-Pogacar (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), pp. 188–210; Eshelman, *Early Soviet Postmodernism*; Aleksandr Genis, ‘Postmodernism and *Sots-Realism*’ in Mikhail Epstein, Alexander Genis, and Slobodanka Vladiv-Glover, *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 1999), pp. 197–211; Karpov, ‘Russkii postmodernizm v otechestvennoi nauke’; Mark Lipovetsky, ‘Russian Literary Postmodernism in the 1990s’, *SEER*, 79 (2001), 31–50; Skoropanova, ‘Tipologiiia russkoi postmodernistskoi literatury’.

underground evolution and its roots in twentieth-century Western philosophy are not often made an issue. Moreover, there have not been many attempts to illuminate clearly and in detail the relationship of postmodernism to modernism, although there have been a few.<sup>15</sup> There are other conceptual problems, too. The critical reader is never fully free of the suspicion that ‘postmodernism’ is, to a degree, an apparently convenient way to describe and conceptualise what might not yet be fully describable, let alone theorisable. It seems occasionally that the term is used to subsume anything new, any cultural or literary difference that is real, but yet too diffuse to be grasped analytically. In addition, whereas the stylistic criteria for describing postmodern works generally coincide, the critics in question occasionally devise different sub-categories or different genealogies of the phenomenon. These can, at times, appear quite arbitrary, and are not always fully comprehensible owing to their lack of semantic precision.<sup>16</sup> Finally, there can be no doubt that in the commercial practice of post-Soviet Russian literature, ‘postmodernism’ has been a label promoting the marketing side of publishing — ‘sex and crime sell’, as it were. Writers in the immediate post-Soviet period were frequently not sufficiently discriminating when adopting the term and ‘buying into’ the trend.

Ultimately, it may be that there is no clear or accepted definition of ‘Russian postmodernism’ and the term may be nothing but a catch-all for a number of writers and works written in different periods, ranging from the 1920s to the 1990s and beyond. A number of scholars emphasise the stylistic and external features of postmodernism,<sup>17</sup> while others attempt to describe

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<sup>15</sup>e.g. Lipovetsky, ‘Russian Literary Postmodernism in the 1990s’.

<sup>16</sup>e.g. Skoropanova, ‘Tipologiya russkoi postmodernistskoi literatury’.

<sup>17</sup>e.g. Egorova; Golubkov; Ivanova, ‘Preodolevshie postmodernizm’; Natal’ia Ivanova, ‘Uskol’zaiushchaia sovremennost’. *Russkaia literatura XX–XXI vekov: ot “vnekomplekt-*

it as a literary-historical period *ante rem* which would reflect certain aspects of postmodern philosophy.<sup>18</sup>

Several objections can be brought forward against all these approaches. First, the label ‘postmodern’ is better not used as a ‘metaphor’ for the pluralism of the contemporary Russian literary landscape in general. Second, it is better not applied on purely stylistic grounds, but arguably, should take account of the underlying worldview. Third, the notion of ‘Russian postmodernism’ as a literary-historical period stretching from socialist realism to the present is deeply problematic. The fact that scholars view socialist realism as constituting ‘postmodernism with a modernist face’<sup>19</sup> raises questions about the relationship between modernism and postmodernism. Is it a form of ‘most-modernism’,<sup>20</sup> that is a more radical stage of modernism (modernism ‘on steroids’, as one might wish to call it figuratively), that is meant, or does the term refer to an altogether different poetics?

Although many of the approaches referenced above contain a number of interesting thoughts which will be included in our discussion where appropriate, the reader will perceive that the term ‘postmodern’ is used often in specious ways. I submit that the development of Russian literature from

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noi” k postsovetskoi, a teper’ i vseмирnoi’, *Voprosy literatury*, 2007.5/6, 30–53; Elisabeth Markstein, ‘Der geistesgeschichtliche Kontext der russischen literarischen Postmoderne,’ *Osteuropa*, 43 (1993), 957–964.

<sup>18</sup>Epstein, *After the Future*, pp. 188–210; Eshelman, pp. 10–12, 65–66.

<sup>19</sup>Epstein, *After the Future*, p. 207; cf. also Boris Grois, who advances a comparable model of socialist realism being a mixture of modernism and postmodernism [‘Polutornyi stil’: sotsrealizm mezhdu modernizmom i postmodernizmom’, in *Sotsrealisticheskii kanon*, ed. by Hans Günther and Evgenii Dobrenko (St Petersburg: Akademicheskii proekt, 2000), pp. 109–118].

<sup>20</sup>Christine Brooke-Rose, *A Rhetoric of the Unreal: Studies in Narrative and Structure, especially of the Fantastic* (Cambridge, London, New York *et al.*: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 345.

modernism and socialist realism to *sots-art* and until the present day is best approached as different stages on a continuum, where later developments react to preceding ones without necessarily constituting definable new periods or poetics. The same would apply to post-Soviet ‘postmodernism’ which is best seen as a reaction to, and as a coming to terms with, the Soviet political and cultural heritage in the post-Soviet period, rather than as a reflection of postmodern philosophy. Norman Shneidman notes similarly, that

[i]n Soviet and Russian terms, ‘post-modernism,’ as it is currently applied, can be viewed as a misnomer. Modernism in Russia is a thing of the distant past. It goes back to the beginning of the century. Today Russian post-modernism is not a reaction to modernism but rather a reflex towards Soviet social, ideological, and aesthetic values, and a reaction against socialist realism.<sup>21</sup>

The present work argues that, in addition to reflexes towards Soviet and post-Soviet culture and literature, post-Soviet Russian fiction contains, however, a re-appraisal and continuation (rather than rejection) of certain modernist features, in particular its metaphysical seekings. For this reason, that is to say features that bespeak a continuation of key aspects of Russian modernism in the post-Soviet period, the alternative concept of ‘post-Soviet neo-modernism’ will be introduced. Such terminology also has the advantage of avoiding the ambiguity inherent in the term ‘postmodernism’ with which Shneidman rightly takes issue. (The next chapter will offer a full discussion of the terminological implications of ‘postmodernism’.)

Mikhail Epstein uses the term ‘neomodernist’ to describe a nostalgic ‘second wave’ of modernism in the 1960s and 1970s, reviving various modernist

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<sup>21</sup>N. N. Shneidman, *Russian Literature, 1988–1994: The End of an Era* (Toronto, Buffalo and London: University of Toronto Press, 1995), p. 173.



trends, whereas he sees the 1970s and 1980s as giving rise to opposing aesthetics, a Russian version of postmodernism, namely conceptualism.<sup>22</sup> The phenomenon of conceptualism will be considered in Chapter 4. Whereas in the present work we agree with Epstein in our usage of ‘neo-modernist’ as implying a conscious drawing on modernist poetics, we will, unlike Epstein, take this concept to include the contemporary, post-Soviet period as well, given that it will be suggested that the post-Soviet works to be analysed reveal a turning towards Russian modernism for artistic and thematic inspiration, rather than a fully postmodern aesthetics and worldview.<sup>23</sup>

The post-Soviet period, which now covers a period of nearly twenty years, is itself of compelling interest, among other things because of the change in literature’s sociological and economic role, which naturally bears directly on the kind of works written and on the individual writer’s own self-concept.

By comparison with other cultures, literature has historically always played a paramount role in Russian society and culture, the reasons for which are customarily sought in the absence of public debate and democratically engaged institutions together with the existence of censorship. As a result, literature and literary criticism have served as a forum for social and political discussion. Arguably, this predominantly educational and ideological role pushed literature’s aesthetic function into the background. The Russian writer has always been more than a mere poet. Certain writers have been

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<sup>22</sup>Epstein, *After the Future*, p. 207.

<sup>23</sup>The term ‘neo-modernist’ has also been used by Alexander Prokhorov relative to the Russian writer Sergei Dovlatov. In his essay ‘The Case for The Implied Author in the Works of Sergei Dovlatov’, *Graduate Essays on Slavic Languages and Literatures*, 9 (1996), 75–80 (p. 80), Prokhorov suggests viewing Dovlatov as a ‘neo-modernist’, arguing that Dovlatov’s works are furnished with the central consciousness of a modernist implied author.

widely recognised as moral authorities: Lev Tolstoy in pre-revolutionary Russia, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn in Khrushchev's Soviet Union, and Chingiz Aitmatov during *perestroika*. In the Soviet period, however, literature became an instrument of ideological and political propaganda, resulting in the existence, during the USSR's last few decades, of two opposed literary cultures, one officially recognised and administered, and another unofficial, existing as the phenomenon of *samizdat*. The *perestroika* period, however, witnessed the publication of previously prohibited works and the repatriation of *émigré* literature, and this marked the apogee of literature's public role as the privileged sphere of democratic expression. Viewed historically, this turned out to be only a temporary phenomenon: the new freedom of the press and of public opinion made the traditional role of Russian literature as prominent actant on the civic scene more or less redundant. Very quickly, with the appearance of commercialism, the growth of pulp fiction and the differentiation of literary production to suit a greater variety of reader interests, literature ceased to be the privileged bearer of great socio-political meaning and became a mere function of language; the writer had ceased to be a prophet or teacher.<sup>24</sup>

But were things quite as they seemed? According to the German Slavist Elisabeth Markstein,<sup>25</sup> for example, it was not only the transformational role of social and market forces which succeeded in marginalising the moral standing of Russian literature, but also the conscious denial by writers them-

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<sup>24</sup>Karla Hielscher, 'Abschied vom Mythos Literatur: Zur Situation des literarischen Lebens in Rußland', talk at the Theodor Heuss Academy Gummersbach, 17 April 1998; cf. Hielscher, 'Ablösung eines Literaturmodells oder Ende der Literatur? Zur Situation der russischen Literatur in der Nach-Perestrojka-Periode', *Osteuropa*, 44 (1994), 309–319.

<sup>25</sup>Markstein, 'Der geistesgeschichtliche Kontext der russischen literarischen Postmoderne', pp. 961–962.

selves of the notion that their task was in any way linked to the propagation of values, truths or philosophical knowledge. By so doing, many of them appear to have broken with the educative tradition of Russian literature of the radical nineteenth-century writers or of the socialist-realist period. Rather, artistic creativity asserted its (essentially modernist) right to exist in and for itself. Arguably, this paradigmatic change in literary motivation and expression is what most characterises post-Soviet Russian literary ‘postmodernism’. Whereas traditional Russian literature had been informed by the desire to teach or to engage, whichever ideology might have motivated its specific precepts, so-called ‘postmodernists’ reject the call of Nikolai Nekrasov to ‘sow the reasonable, the good and the eternal’.<sup>26</sup>

In particular, it is often argued that Russian ‘postmodernism’ is not interested in subjects, plots or heroes which make rational ‘sense’, convey a moral framework or some positivist worldview, or project any form of future, utopian or teleological explanation for history or the development of the individual; as Markstein has pointed out: ‘[t]here is no rationality in postmodern texts, no ordering hierarchies, no intellectual paternalism, no characters to identify with.’<sup>27</sup> At a moment of crisis for traditional literature and against the background of the absence of any redemptive utopia, postmodern writers, operating in conditions of aesthetic and stylistic pluralism, prefer to act as irritants, particularly on the moral plane, and to demystify the grand, authoritative ‘icons’ of traditional literature. Nevertheless, as Markstein has argued, their texts are not necessarily devoid of morality; they rather express

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<sup>26</sup>‘Сейте разумное, доброе, вечное, / Сейте! Спасибо вам скажет сердечное / Русский народ...’ From N. A. Nekrasov’s poem ‘Seiateliam’ (1877) [N. A. Nekrasov, *Sobranie sochinenii. Tom vtoroi. Stikhotvoreniia i poemy 1861–1877*, ed. by K. I. Chukovskii (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1965), p. 352].

<sup>27</sup>Markstein, p. 962 (own translation).

their ethics in a humorous, quiet and ironical way.<sup>28</sup> This very aspect of an underlying morality in such works will be analysed in this presentation of research by viewing it in the context of the philosophical concerns that have motivated the Russian literary tradition, which seems to sit uneasily with some aspects of the philosophical underpinnings of postmodernism.

Instead of concentrating on the apparent break with pre-existing Russian literature that the predominance of 'postmodern' stylistic and formal features in the literature widely referred to as 'postmodern' seem to suggest, the present work will argue that the variety of definitions of 'postmodernism' and their sometimes mutually contradictory nature, in conjunction with a recognisable continuation of classical Russian literature's humanist concerns, pose questions about the suitability of 'postmodernism' as a term to characterise post-Soviet literature. While this thesis will show how certain works of the present literary period are marked by such moral and metaphysical seeking, they also incorporate a critique of humanism and rationalism by deconstructing and subjecting it to humour, parody, irony, sarcasm and mockery, although not at the price of rejecting the values of humanism in any final way. This is particularly true for the works of Vladimir Sorokin. Furthermore, a strong element of artistic experimentation in many 'postmodern' or, rather, 'neo-modernist' works, underlines the proximity of such literature to what is usually designated by the term 'modernism'. It will be proposed that there are many elements in post-Soviet fiction which are, in fact, closer to modernism, while the latter movement, regarded typologically, contained structural and semantic features often understood as being archetypically 'postmodern'. These include absurdity, lack of clear implied authorial perspective, instability of narrative worlds, etc. While the nature

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<sup>28</sup>Markstein, pp. 962-964.

of postmodernism poses theoretical questions that are central to our thesis, a pivotal role in the discussion will be played by humour and its allied concepts, too; humour and irony are widely considered to be postmodern characteristics.

The work's secondary focus lies on humour and related concepts, then, for three closely intertwined reasons: first, humour is a central and defining feature in the works of Sorokin, Tuchkov and Khurgin and therefore commands the critic's attention. Humour in different forms and at different levels is present in all of the works analysed below, either directed allegorically and satirically at the Soviet and post-Soviet macro-structural political, economic and social project, or at the low-level ordinary life of every-day characters, or at both, through the parody of elements of Russian culture and history. Second, without anticipating our later discussion of humour and associated categories, the employment of humour in a narrative or with regard to a subject implies a certain detachment and critical distance to, or commenting on, that narrative or subject, since traditional humanist literary humour often facilitates the identification of the implied author's view, whereas pinpointing the implied author in many postmodern works can appear impossible. Hence, a plot or narrative that appears to be reflective of a 'postmodern' worldview or style, but that involves humour which engages with such a worldview, might possibly be more meaningfully taken as implied authorial criticism of such a 'postmodern' worldview. This is not meant to suggest that humour and literary postmodernism are by definition mutually exclusive, but, rather, that analysis of humour found in post-Soviet 'postmodern' Russian literature may provide genuine insight. This leads us to our third point, namely that the particular kind of humour found in the works of concern to this dissertation, humour in the face of pervasive absurdity and meaninglessness, often

appears to embody as underlying philosophy the modernist thought of Henri Bergson and the literary practice of Daniil Kharms. The other main forms of humour which the works studied exhibit seem to be a continuation of such elements in the centuries-long Russian literary tradition of critical humour in a broader way and are therefore not necessarily related to any qualitatively new development which the prefix 'post' in 'postmodernism' would imply. This might even be the case irrespective of any stylistic play, which is often advanced as a 'postmodern' feature.

This work will exemplify and substantiate the above arguments through close analysis of passages from fictional works mainly by the writers Sorokin, Tuchkov and Khurgin, and the approach adopted will be thematic in emphasis. These three writers have been chosen primarily since they have been identified by critics as 'postmodern' and as exemplars of post-Soviet Russian letters; most of all, of course, this applies to Sorokin, about whom much scholarly material relative to 'postmodernism' has been written. Additional reasons for choosing in particular Tuchkov and Khurgin is their engagement with *perestroika* and post-Soviet reality, as well as the fact that, so far, not much critical attention seems to have been devoted to these two writers.

The literary texts of these three writers to be studied are key works that reflect features and concerns also present in a number of their other works. Where appropriate, literary works by other contemporary Russian writers will be referenced in order to highlight features shared with the works on which our discussion focuses. The selection of Sorokin, Tuchkov and Khurgin and certain of their works studied herein exemplifies, perhaps to different degrees, our thesis of 'post-Soviet neo-modernism'.

We will now turn to a discussion of postmodernism and its dialectical relationship with modernity and modernism (Chapter 1), followed by a critical

reflection on the concept of ‘modernity’ in Russia (Chapter 2), before the argument moves on chronologically with our own analysis of Russian modernism and its relationship with Russian ‘postmodernism’ and post-Soviet literature (Chapters 3 and 4). Our argument, which up to this point will be delivered largely in a theoretical and deductive way, will then be corroborated inductively in the subsequent text-based discussions (Chapters 5–7). It will be demonstrated to the reader that the currency which the notion of ‘Russian postmodernism’ enjoys is perhaps not fully deserved, after all, and that the concept of post-Soviet ‘neo-modernism’ may have distinct advantages in enhancing our understanding of post-Soviet fiction.

# Chapter 1

## Postmodernism

*Why should a tramp like you upset the crowd in the bazaar by talking about truth,  
something of which you have no conception? What is truth?*

— Pontius Pilate to Yeshua Ha-Nozri, in *The Master and Margarita*<sup>1</sup>

The fact that the language of postmodernism populates the discourse about post-Soviet Russian literature, as has been outlined in the Introduction, necessitates a discussion of this notion in the light of our proposal to conceptualise post-Soviet fiction as ‘neo-modernist’ and as an indirect continuation of what has characterised many Russian *litterateurs* throughout the centuries, reaching an apogée in modernism: the seeking of an elusive, but absolute, whole and unified reality and truth. As will become clearer in due course, postmodernism with its often particularistic and relativistic tendencies (which may be seen typologically as represented in the above cited words spoken by Pilate to Yeshua) cannot be readily squared with such faith in absolute and universal categories, however. It is suggested that this philosophical aspect ought to be brought into the equation of ‘Russian postmodernism’:

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<sup>1</sup>Mikhail Bulgakov, *The Master and Margarita*, trans. by Michael Glenny (London: Vintage, 2004), p. 33 (ch. 2).



the present work recommends viewing a literary work as postmodern only if, in addition to its possessing ubiquitous postmodern stylistic ‘markers’, its implied worldview is in agreement with such aspects of postmodernism. Let us now turn to an investigation of postmodern terminology in literature and philosophy, and of the dialectical inter-relationship between postmodernism, modernism and modernity.

Any discussion of postmodernism faces a variety of challenges, some of which are fundamental, while others are more technical in nature. The fundamental challenges when defining postmodernism begin with the fact that it is both a phenomenon permeating different areas of life, often labelled ‘post-modernity’, and also a more theoretical discourse spanning different academic disciplines. This is further complicated by the fact that practically everyone engaged in this discourse defines postmodernism more or less decisively differently, depending on their view of ‘modernity’ and ‘modernism’. Some attempt to adopt a purely descriptive stance, others prefer a normative one, while yet others try to unveil what they perceive as postmodernism’s hollow and inadequate nature. In addition, the word has become a feuilletonistic *passepartout* term,<sup>2</sup> generously and diffusely dispensed by the media as well as by cultural and literary commentators, ironically denoting in effect everything modern (understood as being synonymous with *new*, *fashionable*).

In the most basic sense, incommensurable plurality and diversity are agreed by practically everyone to be amongst the chief common denominators of postmodernism. In broad terms, to many postmodern eyes, then, as is often affirmed, everything is relative or provisional, anything and everything contains its own ‘truth’ within itself; comparison is illegitimate, since

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<sup>2</sup>Umberto Eco calls it a ‘term *bon à tout faire*’ [Umberto Eco, *Reflections on the Name of the Rose* (London: Minerva, 1994), p. 65.]

there is no overarching hierarchy of relevance which would enable anyone to judge in any way, be their criteria moral, utilitarian or whatever, between the varying options, opinions and lifestyles that exist. Jacques Derrida famously proclaimed that ‘*il n’y a pas de hors-texte*’ [there is no outside-text],<sup>3</sup> thereby highlighting the precarious epistemological status of the written word and, indeed, of all meanings, and the fact that there is no one to supervise or guard the intended meaning of a given text once it is out and about in the world.<sup>4</sup> The author can never know, and has no means of influencing, what will happen to his text and how it will be subsequently read and interpreted; it acquires a life of its own.<sup>5</sup> In discussing Plato, Derrida compared a written text to a son who, having killed his father-author,

rolls... this way and that like someone who has lost his way, who doesn’t know where he is going, having strayed from the correct path, the right direction, the law of rectitude, the norm; but also like someone who has lost his rights, an outlaw, a pervert, a bad seed, a vagrant, an adventurer, a bum. Wandering in the streets, he doesn’t even know who he is, what his identity — if he has one — might be, what his name is, what his father’s name is.<sup>6</sup>

‘Who knows what Lenin will read in Marx?’<sup>7</sup> Nor, and this is equally im-

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<sup>3</sup>Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, corrected edn (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1997), p. 158.

<sup>4</sup>Peter J. Leithart, *Solomon among the Postmoderns* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2008), pp. 86, 90–93.

<sup>5</sup>Cf. Eco, *Reflections on the Name of the Rose*, p. 7: ‘The text is there, and produces its own effects.’

<sup>6</sup>Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. by Barbara Johnson (London and New York: Continuum, 1981), pp. 143–146 (p. 144).

<sup>7</sup>Leithart, p. 87.

portant, does the reader have any certain guidance or ultimate authority to rely on with regard to the text, since there is no *hors-texte*, no supplemental booklet or explanatory material accompanying the text.<sup>8</sup>

One might regard Derrida's statement concerning the absence of *hors-texte* as a metaphor for postmodernism's scepticism, incommensurability, relativism and provisionalism<sup>9</sup> — there is no expository supplement, no higher reference point that would allow one to cast judgement from above on a text or a lifestyle or a conviction concerning anything at all; all texts, all narratives are equal, and there can be no point of necessary mediation between them.

Such an argument, however, has severe logical implications for any critical investigation of postmodernism. If one argues from within postmodern logic, that is from within a logic of particularisation, plurality, diversity and scepticism in which positions cannot be assessed differently either against each other, or against an *hors-texte*, any attempt at definition in the traditional sense of the word (involving precision and applicability) would be either impossible or a contradiction in itself. After all, what would a definition of any subject look like if it wished to account for the multiplicity and equality of all possible, incommensurable definitions? Postmodernism, therefore, identifies the logic of definition and neutrality as problematic.

To go down such a scepticist path, however, would be tantamount to throwing the proverbial baby out with the bathwater. To appropriate the words of Dostoevsky's character Petr Verkhovenskiï, '[t]he whole thing de-

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<sup>8</sup>Cf. Nicholas Royle, *Jacques Derrida*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 62–66.

<sup>9</sup>The applicability of these different, but related concepts to different postmodern thinkers varies, of course. The case of Derrida's absent *hors-texte* is one of incommensurability rather than relativity, making it impossible for individual items to be related to a common yardstick, for example.

mands the utmost precision, and you keep puzzling me'.<sup>10</sup>

The project of defining postmodernism is further complicated by the fact already mentioned that the same term is used as a signifier for different concepts and discourses, such as the social, philosophical, cultural and literary. Furthermore, since the term 'postmodernism' implies a chronological and/or causal relation to modernity and/or modernism, the question of the specific concepts of modernism and modernity on which one's conceptions of postmodernism and postmodernity are erected, necessitates presumptions as to the former's end and the latter's beginning.<sup>11</sup>

Such questions necessitate an identification of the terminological approach adopted for this discussion, of course. 'Modernity' is understood here to encompass modern times, i.e. the historical period since the Renaissance and the Enlightenment and their respective philosophical, social, scientific and political developments (a more elaborate definition of modernity and postmodernity will be offered on pp. 45ff.), whereas 'modernism' describes the artistic, aesthetic and literary period of the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century.<sup>12</sup> The logical terminological imperative would therefore be to use 'postmodernity/postmodern' to describe the philosophical and sociological aspect of 'postmodernism/postmodernity', and 'postmodernism/postmodernist' to refer to its literary and aesthetic side. However, since this treatment aspires to analyse and understand the literary aspect as embedded within the larger philosophical and social dimensions of 'post-

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<sup>10</sup>Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Devils*, trans. by David Magarshack (Harmondsworth, Baltimore and Toronto: Penguin, 1953), p. 376 (adaptation of translation mine).

<sup>11</sup>Cf. Dunja Kary, *Postmoderne metahistoriographische Fiktion und Andrej Bitovs Puškinskij Dom* (Frankfurt am Main, Berlin, Bern, et al.: Lang, 1999), p. 260.

<sup>12</sup>Cf. Mikhail Epstein, 'Conclusion: On the Place of Postmodernism in Postmodernity', in Epstein, Genis and Vladiv-Glover, *New Perspectives*, pp. 456–467 (pp. 463–467).

modernism/postmodernity', 'postmodernism' and the adjective 'postmodern' will be used throughout as embracing both the literary and the philosophical. 'Modern' and 'modernist' are used as adjectives of 'modernity' and 'modernism' respectively.<sup>13</sup>

In further aggravation of the problem of defining postmodernism, a rigid stylistic systematisation and periodisation might not be helpful, in fact, but rather contradict the fluid nature of literary evolution: '*a range of literary modes — postmodernist, modernist or late-modernist, even nineteenth-century style realist — are all simultaneously available to contemporary writers and may be selected by them at will.*'<sup>14</sup> That does not mean, however, that literary and stylistic discussion is fruitless; rather, on the contrary, that a number of important shifts in the underlying reasons for the use of certain devices and modes can be discerned and used to differentiate between modernism and postmodernism, as for instance McHale does with positing a paradigmatic shift from what he calls modernist 'epistemological' as opposed to postmodernist 'ontological' inquiry.<sup>15</sup> These are points that will be explored later in the chapter.

## 1.1 Terminology

As has already been hinted at, there are serious definitional issues involved with respect to postmodernism both as signifier and as referent, i.e. both

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<sup>13</sup>Exceptions are made, however, where authors who are analysed here have a divergent terminological approach. McHale, for instance, uses 'modernist' and 'postmodernist' to characterise the literary phenomenon; in discussing him and others their original terminology will generally be respected [Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (New York: Methuen, 1987)].

<sup>14</sup>McHale, p. 242, note 17 (emphasis in original).

<sup>15</sup>McHale, pp. 3–11.

as name on the one hand, and as phenomenon and discourse on the other hand. Obviously, the term ‘postmodern’ and its constituent parts do not in themselves appear to make a great deal of sense. The prefix *post-* suggests subsequence, chronological order, a referent following something else. The thing which it supposedly follows is the modern; however, what exactly is or was the ‘modern’?

In its traditional sense, the word ‘modern’ is often used synonymously to mean *fashionable, better, improved, qualitatively different*, thus implying progress.<sup>16</sup> In this sense, ‘modern’ functions as a *substantial indicative*, as a term indicating progress or change and superiority in substance (as different from time-related change, which will be returned to later): it highlights *what* has become fashionable. However, the term can also be employed as meaning *new, ahead of one’s time, different from what went before*, implying *temporal* relevance; it is therefore a *temporal imperative* emphasising that *now* such and such a thing has become popular, or that a certain behaviour should be adopted since it is quickly becoming the rule.<sup>17</sup> In the end, however, this differentiation between *substantial indicative* and *temporal imperative* is artificial; ‘modern’ always involves both, although perhaps the degree to which one or the other is foregrounded in any given context may vary. Consequently, the referent of the adjective ‘modern’, that is its real-world object or behaviour, are in constant flux, since progress and change are amongst the constants and driving forces of human existence; something modern today will be oldfashioned tomorrow, which again will be replaced by something that has become modern in its turn. Here, ‘modern’ is the antonym of ‘antiquated’, and, in Fiedler’s words, implies the vain ‘presumption that it

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<sup>16</sup>Cf. McHale, p. 4.

<sup>17</sup>Wolfgang Iser, *Unsere postmoderne Moderne*, 6th edn (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2002), pp. 67–68.

represent[s] the ultimate advance [...], that beyond it newness [i]s not possible.<sup>18</sup> The temporal relativity of these two terms became evident in the seventeenth-century *Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes*.<sup>19</sup> In this context, ‘postmodern’ is best understood as referring to an attitude that has moved beyond the claim of being the ‘ultimate advance’ of whatever is the signified.

Such distinctions can take numerous forms: examples range from rationally organised ‘modern’ nation-states versus irrational pre-modern tribes, to high arts versus ordinary life, or to secularism versus religion.<sup>20</sup> The modern notion of progress, in fact, rests on two assumptions: first, that ‘*we* know nature as it truly is and thus have the ability to control nature in ways *they* never imagined. We can arrive at certain knowledge of the world through scientific investigation; they operate by guesswork, tradition, and opinion’;<sup>21</sup> second, that

there is a cut in time between all that went before and that comes after the beginning of modernity. Modernity establishes itself by digging a monumental ditch, a ‘great divide,’ between the past and the present, between those still living in the past and those who are fully in touch with the possibilities of the present.<sup>22</sup>

This relationship between ‘us’ and ‘them’, the ‘other’, so defining of the notion of progress as an intrinsic value, and thus characterising the epoch

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<sup>18</sup>Leslie A. Fiedler, *Cross the Border — Close the Gap* (New York: Stein and Day, 1972), p. 61.

<sup>19</sup>Welsch, pp. 66–68.

<sup>20</sup>Leithart, pp. 30–33.

<sup>21</sup>Leithart, p. 32 (emphases in original); cf. Bruno Latour, *We have never been Modern*, trans. by Catherine Porter (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), pp. 10–12, 97–103.

<sup>22</sup>Leithart, p. 32.

of modernity, constitutes an ingrained and fundamental concern for postmodern thinkers. Consequently, postmodernists call for a tearing down of all dividing walls between ‘us’ and the ‘other’, however the ‘us’ and the ‘other’ are constituted. As such, this is a deeply moral concern, of course, and may be an underlying reason for the fall of the Berlin wall, for example, being regarded as the ‘emblem of the “postmodernization” of the former Eastern bloc’.<sup>23</sup> More importantly, understanding this notion of progress as the supreme value of modernity in the West will facilitate our appreciation of the Russian cultural tradition of ascribing such status to the antithesis of progress: continuity. Chapter 2 will examine in greater detail this Russian preference for tradition and its resulting resistance to change.

### 1.1.1 Literature

In literature, the language of ‘postmodernism’ gained ground during the 1960s when critics such as Leslie Fiedler and Susan Sontag began to perceive and defend the distinctiveness of the new literature, thereby discarding what they called ‘high modernism’ as a reference point. Writers such as John Barth, Leonard Cohen, Norman Mailer and Boris Vian were appreciated for the connection which they created between the cultural and intellectual elite and mass culture,<sup>24</sup> which was experienced as notably different from what was understood to be the hallmark of modernism: too elitist, too high in practice, too opposed to mass culture, hence deepening the division between ‘high brow’ and ‘low brow’ culture. Such an attitude manifested itself through modernists’ disenchantment with industrial civilisation in general and with

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<sup>23</sup>Sven Spieker, ‘The Postutopian Subject in Soviet and East German Postmodernism: Andrei Bitov and Christa Wolf’, *Comparative Literature Studies*, 32 (1995), 479–496 (p. 480).

<sup>24</sup>Welsch, pp. 14–15.



the machinery of cultural production in particular. From Fiedler's perspective, the pivot on which the new postmodernism turns is its desire to cross all hitherto closed borders and to overcome existent gaps, not only between the intelligentsia and the masses, high brow and low brow, on the one hand, but also between writer, critic and reader on the other:

Post-Modernism provides an example of a young, mass audience urging certain aging, reluctant critics onward toward the abandonment of their former elite status in return for a freedom the prospect of which more terrifies than elates them. In fact, Post-Modernism implies the closing of the gap between critic and audience, too, if by critic one understands 'leader of taste' and by audience 'follower.' But most importantly of all, it implies the closing of the gap between artist and audience, or at any rate, between professional and amateur in the realm of art.<sup>25</sup>

### 1.1.2 Philosophy

Having looked at the origins of the term 'postmodernism' in literature, it is now time to dig deeper into the area of philosophy that it signifies. The first philosopher to have used the term 'postmodernism' was Jean-François Lyotard in his 1979 volume *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (*La Condition postmoderne: Rapport sur le savoir*). This work, aimed at discussing the role and character of knowledge in present-day science and society, rests on the argument that contemporary technological development affects knowledge: contemporary technological advances challenge the inner character and the demands of current knowledge which is needed to respond to the challenges those technologies present. Technologies which conform to

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<sup>25</sup>Fiedler, p. 78.

the character of knowledge thus understood are to be utilised, whereas those which do not are to be rejected. Postmodern knowledge, in his view, has been commercialised and has become a commodity, unlike the status of knowledge in earlier times. Lyotard theorises knowledge with the help of two concepts: ‘metanarratives’ and ‘grand narratives’. Both concepts aid an understanding of how human experience and cognition tie together disparate items of individual knowledge, from historical data to scientific discovery, in order to form a coherent narrative. Different discourses, such as those of science and poetry, for example, are ‘metanarratives’; each has individual and particular sets of rules as to how separate pieces of human experience are to be related. A chemical formula, though the correct way of representing reality in science, would be considered spurious in poetry.<sup>26</sup> A ‘metanarrative’, therefore, determines the legitimacy of certain forms of narrative or statement. His second concept is that of ‘grand narratives’, which, according to Malpas, by

[b]ringing together all of the different narrative and metanarrative forms of a particular culture, [...] produce systematic accounts of how the world works, how it develops over history, and the place of human beings within it. Put simply, grand narratives construct accounts of human society and progress.<sup>27</sup>

The delegitimisation of these grand narratives, be it the progressive emancipation of reason, freedom and humanity in enlightenment;<sup>28</sup> the teleology of the spirit in Hegelian idealism; the progressive emancipation of labour, which had been regarded as catastrophic by Marx since it also was the source for the alienation of value in capitalism; the advancement of ‘techno-science’;

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<sup>26</sup>Simon Malpas, *The Postmodern* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 36–37.

<sup>27</sup>Malpas, p. 37.

<sup>28</sup>Cf. Chistiakova, ‘Homo postmodernus i ego otnoshenie k miru’, pp. 13–18.

and Christianity with its narrative of salvation from the Garden Eden to the Heavenly Jerusalem (which Lyotard regards as modern insofar as it is different from the ancient world, even though it has been called into question by modernity's other grand narratives) began arguably with romanticism,<sup>29</sup> but was only made complete when appraised positively in the twentieth century. Before the latter took place, however, a spirit of pessimism was prevalent at the turn of the century, with artists like Musil, Hofmannsthal, Schönberg and philosophers such as Wittgenstein lamenting the loss of comprehensive unity,<sup>30</sup> '[t]he grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation.'<sup>31</sup> The result of this irretrievable loss of wholeness of interpretation (however retrospective and illusory the latter might have been in reality) is infinite plurality and heterogeneity. What may be referred to as conscious postmodernism, however, entails a positive appraisal of this phenomenon.

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<sup>29</sup>For an appreciation of romanticism as a reaction to modernity, see Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*, The A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts, 1965. The National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, ed. by Henry Hardy (London: Chatto & Windus, 1999). Furthermore, one of the key aspects in which regard romanticism can arguably be viewed as predecessor to modernism and postmodernism is its rejection of rationalism. This is embodied in theoretical approaches and in literary recourse to the uncanny, fantastic, surreal, mythological, mysterious and the desire to return to the original, chaotic state of nature, as is characteristic of the period and, for example, of works by Louis Aragon, E.T.A. Hoffmann and Friedrich Schlegel [v. Karl Heinz Bohrer, 'Wie romantisch ist die Moderne, wie modern die Romantik?', in: *Russische Moderne Interkulturell: Von der Blauen Blume zum Schwarzen Quadrat*, ed. by Barbara Aufschnaiter and Dunja Brötz (Innsbruck: Studienverlag, 2004) pp. 23–29].

<sup>30</sup>Welsch, pp. 31–33.

<sup>31</sup>Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 37.

Lyotard clearly distances himself from the view of postmodernism as an epoch or period, preferring to see it as a continuation of modernity and modernism: '[a] work can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant.'<sup>32</sup> Lyotard's conception of postmodernism appears to approximate to one of heightened modernism, since postmodernism redeems the promises and demands of artistic and scientific modernism.<sup>33</sup> A similar idea has been expressed by the literary scholar Christine Brooke-Rose, who proposed that postmodernism 'is a sort of English equivalent to *nouveau nouveau*, for it merely means moderner modern (most-modernism?), although it could in itself (and sometimes does) imply a reaction against "modernism".'<sup>34</sup> If 'modernism' as an artistic and literary movement was motivated by an ambivalent reaction to modernity, as it took issue with urbanisation, rationalism and mechanisation, postmodernism may fruitfully be seen as an ambivalent reaction to both modernity and modernism, after all.<sup>35</sup> Section 1.3 will offer more elucidation on this matter.

This, however, is only one side of the coin, namely the one viewing postmodernism in its relation to artistic modernism and the various aesthetic 'avant-garde' movements which it encompassed. Turning to the other side of the coin, that is to postmodernism's relationship with modernity, it becomes obvious that postmodernism is a counter-reaction to the experience of modernity and of the Cartesian worldview with its *mathesis universalis* ('universal science') in particular (see p. 43). Marked by unifying programmes (and

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<sup>32</sup>Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 79.

<sup>33</sup>Welsch, p. 36.

<sup>34</sup>Brooke-Rose, p. 345.

<sup>35</sup>Cf. Leithart, p. 34; Epstein, 'Conclusion: On the Place of Postmodernism in Postmodernity', pp. 463–467.

even modernity's strongest counter-programme, romanticism, was inspired by a vision of unity), modernity is what postmodernism rejects and responds to by a radical emphasis on plurality.<sup>36</sup>

Such an idea of plurality is in a fundamental way rooted in an understanding of justice; different 'truths', discourses and meanings in an age beyond consensus are all incommensurable. This requires a certain anti-totalising attitude to prevent assigning more power or legitimacy to any single stance or discourse, including one's own. This highlights the great interest which many postmodern theorists, such as Lyotard, Derrida and Foucault, have for minorities (in all senses; anyone who does not feel at home within a dominant paradigm or discourse), and why such thinkers are so concerned with violence and power and their linguistic dimension.<sup>37</sup>

Returning to our main subject matter, epistemology, Lyotard struggled with knowledge having become a commodity; this relates strongly to his usage of his term 'techno-scientific society' (*STS*), which points to his perception of knowledge (and indeed the purpose of human existence and social interaction) as having been reduced to a function of technological and scientific progress as well as of the market place. Although the grand narratives that characterised modernity and which gave knowledge scope and meaning, may have shared with myth the intention of legitimising certain ways of thinking, institutions, social and political practices, legislation, ethics and

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<sup>36</sup>Welsch, p. 36.

<sup>37</sup>Welsch, pp. 36–37; v. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, pp. 101–140 (p. 112); Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. by Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988); Christopher Norris, "'What is Enlightenment': Kant according to Foucault", in: *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*, ed. by Gary Gutting (Cambridge, New York and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 159–196 (pp. 183–191).

other goals, grand narratives are in no way myths or fables. However, he argues, grand narratives are decisively different in one point: unlike myths which function retrospectively, that is seek legitimacy for an original founding act, grand narratives work prospectively, that is they look for legitimacy in an unrealised, still to be redeemed future. Such a grand idea or narrative legitimises, because it has universal validity, giving direction to all spheres of human reality. This is what gives modernity its specific character as a *project*. Unlike Habermas, who suggests that this project has been left unfinished and needs to be resumed, Lyotard is convinced that this project has been liquidated, the symbolic paradigm for which liquidation is Auschwitz. The only narrative that persists is that of ‘capitalist techno-science’, which, however, destroys modernity while claiming its realisation. The technologically and scientifically attained mastering of objects by subjects has not led to more freedom, more public education or more equally distributed wealth. As Leithart puts it, ‘[m]odern politics promised freedom through progressive control over nature and society, but postmodernists claim that modernity brought only slavery.’<sup>38</sup>

An interesting correlation can be observed between knowledge and grand narrative. All grand narratives, such as Christianity and Christian eschatology or narratives of Enlightenment and progress, Hegelianism and Marxism (all of which fundamentally contain elements of eschatology, utopia, human progress and teleology) must be able to be known, to be perceived as *publically shared knowledge* rather than as private religious, social or political convictions or beliefs. One of Lyotard’s main points is that postmodern knowledge is fragmentary because of the end of grand narratives. They used to confer meaning on existence and knowledge, providing an explanatory

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<sup>38</sup>Leithart, p. 144.

framework for the interpretation of individual pieces of knowledge and its respective discourses. Such grand narratives represented ultimate or meta-knowledge and were universally accepted as such. This can be seen as evidenced with regard to Christianity in the Middle Ages as well as to Enlightenment, Hegelianism and Marxism in modernity. The postmodern, as Lyotard points out, is marked by the loss of these grand narratives. From this, however, follows something even more significant: a shift in the conceptualisation of the *episteme*, of how knowledge is universally defined and treated. To cite Lyotard:

The ‘crisis’ of scientific knowledge, signs of which have been accumulating since the end of the nineteenth century, is not born of a chance proliferation of sciences, itself an effect of progress in technology and the expansion of capitalism. It represents, rather, an internal erosion of the legitimacy principle of knowledge.<sup>39</sup>

The postmodern philosophy of subjectivity, relativism and provisionalism<sup>40</sup> also embraces knowledge and epistemological discourse, so the fact that there may be no absolute knowledge any longer explains the disappearance of historically dominant grand narratives. To draw on an illustration from every-day life, people casually speak about drinking tea; but, in truth, what is consumed is not tea (the leaves), but water poured on the tea, the

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<sup>39</sup>Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 39.

<sup>40</sup>There is, as to be expected, disagreement on this; outright critics of postmodernism insist on it being relativistic [e.g. Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 225; James Moreland, *Kingdom Triangle* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), pp. 100–104], whereas others, who are more sympathetic to postmodernism, detect some value in it. Leithart, for example, rejects the term but more benevolently speaks of its provisional nature. Here, both terms are frequently used together, to accommodate these diverging views.

latter infusing the former. A generation or two ago, people would have referred to infusing tea, rather than making tea. The water infused with the tea itself takes on the very quality and character of tea, which explains why it is called tea. This is a perfect image for the process by which knowledge, which is intricately related to truth, becomes infused by the epistemological relativism or provisionalism of late modernity and postmodernism.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, this is also the underlying reason why utopia, eschatology and chiliasm are markedly absent from postmodernism — a precondition for their validity as narratives is a shared belief and knowledge of them,<sup>42</sup> which,

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<sup>41</sup>I am indebted to Dr. James K. A. Smith for this analogy.

<sup>42</sup>Pre- or non-naturalistic concepts of knowledge included what today is not viewed as knowledge any longer, but as private beliefs, for example. Aristotle differentiated rationality into theoretical, practical and *poietic* (artistic) reason (Welsch, p. 278); Augustine thought of love as the source of knowledge: '[h]e does not think solely in terms of knowledge, or the exercise of the memory and understanding, but more importantly and fundamentally in terms of the will and love which inspire man's search for knowledge' [Carol Harrison, *Beauty and Revelation in the Thought of Saint Augustine* (Oxford, New York, Auckland et al.: Clarendon Press, 1992) p. 148]. Blaise Pascal in his *Pensées* theorised rationality (*raison*) as consisting of three faculties or orders: the order of love (which perceives religious phenomena), of the spirit (which corresponds to scientific insight), and of the flesh (which is associated with politics). All three spheres are fundamentally governed by rationality and logic, but distinctly different ones. Faith is governed by a logic and rationality which is incommensurable with that of political actions. The expression of the first is love, whereas the materialisation of the second is power; they cannot be expressed vice versa. The same holds true for the realm of scientific knowledge, in which rationality only proves itself reasonable as long as it recognises its limits, that is the fact that it has no explanatory power regarding the orders of love and the flesh (Welsch, pp. 285–286). In a similar way to Augustine, Lev Tolstoy's character Prince Andrei famously ponders over the dependence of understanding and knowledge on love: 'All, everything that I understand, I understand only because I love' [Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace: The Maude Translation, Background and Sources, Criticism*, ed. by George Gibian, 2nd edn



if not entirely lost, has become either relative, provisional or incommensurable. However, although this can develop into a chicken-and-egg argument, it would appear that the devaluation of knowledge is in actual fact only a symptom of the depreciation of eschatology or teleology.

## 1.2 Modernity and Postmodernity

In 1619, Descartes wrote the following of his project to sum up all science and knowledge into one mathematical theory (*mathesis universalis*):

What I want to produce is [...] a completely new science, which would provide a general solution to all possible equations involving any sort of quantity, whether continuous or discrete, each according to its nature... There is, I think, no imaginable problem which cannot be solved at any rate by such lines as these... Almost nothing in geometry will remain to be discovered.<sup>43</sup>

According to Michael Gillespie, '[t]he ultimate result of these efforts [...] was a new science based on the natural light of reason that revolutionized European thought and helped to bring the modern age into being.'<sup>44</sup> Along with the project for creating a universal mathematics which would account for the

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(New York and London: Norton, 1996), p. 870]; cf. also James R. Peters, *The Logic of the Heart: Augustine, Pascal, and the Rationality of Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academics, 2009). Today, 'knowledge' and 'rationality' are widely conceived as consisting of their theoretical component only.

<sup>43</sup>Descartes to Beeckman, March 26, 1619, cited by Michael Allen Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 170.

<sup>44</sup>Michael Gillespie, p. 170.

whole world, Descartes was also concerned with knowledge, and challenged previous or pre-modern and moral approaches to knowledge which did not necessarily require empirical certainty in order to be accepted as knowledge. Descartes made knowledge dependent on cognition, wishing to ‘reject all such merely probable cognition and resolve to believe only what is perfectly known and incapable of being doubted.’<sup>45</sup> However, the only indubitable thing was taken to be that an ‘I’ is presently thinking, and therefore that ‘I’ must presently exist. Hence his conclusion, *cogito ergo sum*.

The Cartesian worldview and epistemology could be taken as a possible metaphor for modernity, in which human existence was reduced to those aspects which could be subjected to reason. That one of these aspects, knowledge, was also reduced to scientific knowledge, at the expense of other, non-empirical forms of knowledge, has already been discussed above. Naturally, an already purely cognitive epistemology such as the Cartesian (and hence, generally modern) one is reductive and does not account for the true nature of knowledge. Let us consider the following comparisons. One can imagine a writer whose ten fingers know how to use a typewriter or keyboard effectively, but who might still have difficulty in spontaneously identifying the position of a specific letter on the keyboard, since knowing the keyboard involves practical, rather than cognitive knowledge; in a way, it is the fingers which know the keyboard, not the head (although, of course, it is a neural function above all). To give another example: it is possible never to have seen a map of one’s home-town, but still to know one’s way around; never to have paid attention to street signs, but nevertheless to know the place intimately. This kind of pre-cognitive, intuitive knowledge is sometimes more useful than cognitive knowledge. Such examples might shed light

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<sup>45</sup>Cited by Michael Gillespie, p. 191.

on postmodernism's critique of modernity's reduction of knowledge and of man himself to cognition and rationality.<sup>46</sup>

To return to Descartes once again: another, though intricately related, consequence of the *cogito ergo sum* dictum is modernity's reductive and rationalistic philosophical anthropology, by which man is reduced to being a 'thinking thing', that is to his cognition. By throwing overboard pre-modern holistic conceptions of human nature, modernity strove to 'sterilise' and 'cleanse' its philosophical anthropology by cutting off its 'bowels',<sup>47</sup> that is the 'messy', so to speak, emotive, instinctive, uncontrollable dimensions of human existence, thereby rejecting — or attempting to overcome — the notion of humans as embodied and affective creatures.

One might dare to venture even deeper into the dark, unenlightened and messy realm of human existence, often referred to as the psyche. Psychoanalysis, for instance, could well be viewed as an epitome of the modern project for managing and controlling all spheres of life and for freeing humanity of any residue of irrationalism; it is an attempt rationally and neatly to map and dissect, comprehend and ultimately control and utilise that which is most irrational, chaotic and contradictory, namely: the human soul.<sup>48</sup>

Modernity has thus been lucidly summed up by Peter Leithart as the following:

a cultural formation that has risen and become dominant in

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<sup>46</sup>Examples courtesy of Dr. James K. A. Smith.

<sup>47</sup>Hebraic thought as evident in the Bible, for example, placed human emotions in the lower anatomy, that is in the liver, bowels, kidney, 'loins', whereas intellect and will were located in the heart, which was thought of as the governing centre of the person (*Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. by David Noel Freedman [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000], p. 563).

<sup>48</sup>Leithart, pp. 47, 77–78, 107–108.

Europe and North America and to some extent elsewhere during the last four centuries. It is characterized by beliefs and styles of thought that aspire to reduce the complexity and evanescence of reality to stable order; it refers to the institutions that attempt to manage social, economic, religious and political, and especially religio-political turbulence; it refers to the scientific practices that seek to map reality in theory [...] and to manage and improve nature through technology; it refers to the civilization in which metaphors of ‘machinery’ and ‘factory’ move from the technological and economic spheres to guide political programmes, architectural styles, and conceptions of the human being [...]<sup>49</sup>

Having established what modernity is, it is necessary to return to the twentieth-century reaction to modernity, namely postmodernism. Leithart summarises postmodernism metaphorically as:

a knot of cultural, philosophical, and social developments, arising from intensifications, inversions, and unmaskings of modernity, which challenges, doubts, and rejects the modern trinity of control, liberation, and progress. Postmodernity contests modernity’s aspiration to sculpt the mutable mist of the world. Postmodernity is vapor’s revenge. [...] As an economic and social system, postmodernity is a historical demonstration that modernity’s control was illusory in important respects, and postmodern theory is the intellectual reflection on this historical demonstration.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup>Leithart, pp. 32–33.

<sup>50</sup>Leithart, pp. 55–56

According to Leithart there seem to be three shifts of fundamental philosophical importance marking the transformation from a ‘modern’ to a ‘post-modern’ mind. These relate to power, the self and knowledge. With regard to the first of these, Lyotard, Foucault and Derrida embody the postmodern concern with the totalising and oppressive power of grand narratives. With respect to the modern sense of the self, however, the essence of which Descartes believed (or rather *knew*) he had located in cognition and the notion of a self-constructed self, this was already understood to stand on porous grounds. Such thinkers as Hume and Locke had pointed out that identity and the self are subject to temporal change, and ultimately to death. Kant doubted the validity of the Cartesian equation of ‘I think’ and ‘I am’, proposing instead that the subject is a function of its experiences. Freud’s theory about the unconscious disrupted notions concerning subjectivity and the stable, comprehensible self even further. Moreover, modernity caused identity to become more fragile through the social and geographical mobility that it created, as could be seen in some modernist literature (see section 1.3 below). Postmodernism exacerbates the dissolution and fragmentation of identity and the self by developments brought about by globalisation, closer contact between cultures and multi-culturalism, and by such economic and cultural developments as electronic communications.<sup>51</sup>

Turning now to the key element highlighted by Leithart: postmodern knowledge. This, like so much sand in one’s hand, is always incommensurable, provisional (critics would say relativistic), vaporous, liquid, intangible, indeterminate, and evasive; knowledge is never ultimate or complete, as that would be a *tort*, an act of violence and injustice against what Plato had conceptualised as original ideas, truth and knowledge, the shadows of which

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<sup>51</sup>Leithart, pp. 59–161.

on the walls of the cave are the only, albeit imperfect way in which one can relate to it. Consequently, in the absence of universals, it is the context and the reader that determine the meaning of the written and spoken word and of knowledge more broadly.<sup>52</sup> Postmodernism tends to deny the possibility both of objective knowledge and of absolute truth. Postmodernism to a large extent denies that people '[...] can function objectively when it comes to rationality and knowledge.'<sup>53</sup> Knowledge is conceptualised as a social and linguistic construction, which does not correspond to the modern view of reason which entailed

a claim to dispassionate knowledge, a person's ability to view reality not as a conditioned participant but as an unconditioned observer — to peer at the world from a vantage point outside the flux of history [...] In response to the compartmentalization characteristic of the modern worldview, the watchword of postmodernism is *holism* — the desire to put back together what modernity has torn asunder'.<sup>54</sup>

Ideas related to the notion of postmodernity being the result of the failure of the modern grand narratives to materialise have been advanced by the French thinker Jean Baudrillard. He argues that the Hegelian project of reconciling reality with reason has indeed come about, but in a way which

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<sup>52</sup>Leithart, pp. 47, 56–58, 95; Eagleton, *After Theory*, pp. 103–109; Malpas, pp. 56–65; Moreland, pp. 78–81. Determining meaning is never independent from its context, of course, and contextual reading not exclusively postmodern. Postmodernism is marked by a high degree of incommensurability and subjectivity, however, since it assumes the absence of an ultimate arbiter of knowledge, truth and meaning, as discussed earlier.

<sup>53</sup>Moreland, p. 78.

<sup>54</sup>Stanley J. Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1993), p. 15 (emphasis in original).

was not envisaged by Hegel: in contemporary ‘hyperreality’, which replaces real ‘reality’.

There is no longer any critical and speculative distance between the real and the rational. There is no longer really even any projection of models in the real... but an in-the-field, here-and-now transfiguration of the real into model. A fantastic short-circuit: the real is hyperrealised. Neither realised nor idealised; but hyperrealised. The hyperreal is the abolition of the real not by violent distinction, but by its assumption, elevation to the strength of the model.<sup>55</sup>

The acceleration of technological and social change in modernity makes it impossible for man to comprehend the world. Baudrillard suggests that in a pluralistic media-dominated society of instantaneous broadcasting and an over-saturation with images, history and events have become less important than what is made of these events:

Events now have no more significance than their anticipated meaning, their programming and their broadcasting. Only *this event strike* [meaning that reality is ‘on strike’ and allows ‘hyperreality’ to take its place] constitutes a true historical phenomenon — this refusal to signify anything whatsoever, or this capacity to signify anything at all. This is the true end of history, the end of historical Reason.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup>Jean Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities: Or, the End of the Social and Other Essays*, trans. by Paul Foss, Paul Patton and John Johnston (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983), pp. 83–84, cited in Malpas, p. 93.

<sup>56</sup>Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End*, trans. by Chris Turner (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), pp. 21–22 (emphasis in original).

Associated with this is Baudrillard's notion that in postmodernity the image, which is a metaphor for the representation of reality and therefore also of meaning, has lost the semantic link between signifier (the sign or image) and its referent (meaning): the postmodern image, that is representation in late capitalism, is not a reflection of reality any longer. On the contrary, '[i]t bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum.'<sup>57</sup> Baudrillard relates postmodernism to the commodification and consumption-driven nature of society of the late capitalist period. Simulations and images are often perceived as more real than reality, so that society and the individual become the products, rather than being the producers, of simulation. Malpas explains Baudrillard's concept of 'hyperreality' thus:

[i]t does not mean 'unreality', but rather identifies a culture in which the fantastical creations of media, film and computer technologies have come to be more real for us, and to interact more fundamentally with our experiences and desires, than the hitherto predominant realities of nature or spiritual life.<sup>58</sup>

Arguably, some aspects of such philosophical concerns of postmodernity as expressed by Lyotard, Baudrillard, and others referred to, have affected, and have also possibly been affected by, literary postmodernism, to which we shall now turn again.

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<sup>57</sup>Baudrillard, 'Simulacra and Simulations', in *Modernism/Postmodernism*, ed. by Peter Brooker (New York: Longman, 1992), pp. 151–162 (p. 153).

<sup>58</sup>Malpas, pp. 90, 93–96, 121–127 (p. 125.)



## 1.3 Literary Postmodernism

A discussion of the aesthetic and literary relationship between modernism and postmodernism requires now that we shift the focus from ‘modernity’ as a philosophical and social paradigm to ‘modernism’ as an artistic trend of late modernity, given that

[i]t is in the field of literary studies that the term ‘postmodernism’ has received widest usage and provoked the most vexed debate. There have been many attempts to theorise the consequences and manifestations of postmodernism for literature, all usually running into problems of historical and formal definition.<sup>59</sup>

### 1.3.1 Modernism

Even though the formal and historical difficulties of defining modernism are legion, both friends and foes of the concept have understood its nature well enough, so that one may speak of a common denominator concerning what constitutes the essence of modernism. A good adumbration of the subject has been offered by Malcolm Bradbury, which indicates precisely the technical challenges involved in defining the subject matter: it is ‘not so much one modern style as a perpetual pursuit of modern styles for the given creative occasion, in a context in which style is presumed absent.’<sup>60</sup>

David Lodge uses ‘modernism’ to describe ‘the art that is peculiar to the

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<sup>59</sup>Tim Woods, *Beginning Postmodernism* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1999), p. 49.

<sup>60</sup>Malcolm Bradbury, in *A Dictionary of Modern Critical Terms*, ed. by Roger Fowler (London and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), pp. 151–152.

modern period',<sup>61</sup> while pointing out that the modern period was not a monolithic cultural and aesthetic entity. Rather, modernist literature was complemented by persisting 'classic realism' and rebellious 'antimodernism'.<sup>62</sup> The issues that define this peculiarity of modernist art and literature have been discussed by many critics,<sup>63</sup> which is why a full review of their characteristics can be avoided here, enabling us to focus on those issues which are of relevance to our wider argument. Thematically, modernism, including related literary and art movements, such as symbolism, futurism, expressionism, and surrealism, questions the heritage of modernity with its mass society, structuredness of time and life, the horrors of modern history, the notion of progress and its related teleologies, urbanisation, and motorisation. The pervasive moral aspect of modernism and its epistemology appears to have consisted in the recognition of the modern world being spiritually and culturally bankrupt and the ensuing desire to retrieve such deeper meaning. Consequently, being haunted by scepticism, identity crisis, perceptions of human savagery, social apocalypse and fragmentation of the self, modernist literature sought to transcend material circumstances at the levels of the personal, the spiritual and the mystical. It also aspired to explore life's hidden meanings and the unconscious. With inherited religious models of understanding the world being mostly lost to the turn-of-the-century generations, mythology and other irrational models of defining the origins and purposes of humanity, provided the substitute so urgently craved for by modernists

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<sup>61</sup>David Lodge, *Working with Structuralism* (Boston, London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), pp. 3–16 (p. 5).

<sup>62</sup>Lodge, pp. 3–16, 72.

<sup>63</sup>See, for example, Tim Armstrong, *Modernism: A Cultural History* (Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2005), and Peter Childs, *Modernism*, 2nd edn (London and New York: Routledge, 2008).

in order to find answers and order amid social disharmony, and focussed on extreme physical sensations, sexuality and psychology. Furthermore, modernism externalised internal experiences, questioned inherited conceptions of language and subjectivity, resulting in the foregrounding of experimentation with language and point of view.<sup>64</sup>

With respect to the perceived role of literature and art, modernists saw this as fulfilling a function that was pronouncedly different from that in realism: the key concern was *how* something was written or portrayed, not so much *what* this something was (cf. cubism). Content is never truly independent from its form, of course; in modernism, however, the form itself became a significant part of the content: often it was not the actual world or subject matter that was portrayed, but how the latter made the writer or artist feel (cf. expressionism). A piece of art was meant to connote, rather than to denote the world (symbolism).<sup>65</sup> It has been argued that modernist art and literature were indeed driven by the desire to create art which was to be imitated by life, rather than the traditional notion of art imitating life. The basic materialism and lack of spirituality which so exercised modernist writers and artists can also be seen as an explanation of their elitism. It is as if, to bend Pushkin's words to our purpose, they were corpses in the desert, 'tormented with spiritual thirst' and instilled with a mission to 'enflame the hearts of the people with the word' ['The Prophet' ('Prorok') (1826) (own translation)], or slumbering poets who, having been awakened by the divine verb and bored by the bewildering 'vanity fair' of their contemporaries, refuse to worship the popular idol and withdraw from society, fleeing to the

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<sup>64</sup>Childs, pp. 37–78 (p. 43).

<sup>65</sup>Childs, pp. 79–132; for a more comprehensive exposition of European modernism in art, v. Hendrik Roelof Rookmaker, *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1994).

safety of distant banks and woods ['The Poet' ('Poet') (1827)].<sup>66</sup> Although it might appear odd to juxtapose an essentially romanticist concept of the poet with what is being proposed here as a modernist one, one can point to real typological parallels between the two literary movements with regard to the writer's or poet's role *vis-à-vis* society: the prophet's or seer's ability to perceive the transcendent, spiritual and mystical reality beyond the tangible world, and the resulting desire either to pass on such knowledge of the transcendental or, if rejected, to escape to pastures where the 'eternal' can be pursued without wordly distraction. Susan Friedman writes about modernist writers that the search for meaning itself was more important than possible answers:

the search for order and pattern began in its own negation, in the overwhelming sense of disorder and fragmentation caused by the modern materialist world. The artist as seer would attempt to create what the culture could no longer produce: symbol and meaning in the dimension of art, brought into being through the agency of language [...]<sup>67</sup>

Our later chapters will demonstrate the relevance of such philosophical motivation with respect to Russian modernism and our proposal to conceptualise post-Soviet fiction as 'neo-modernist'.

In exemplifying the core issues and characteristics of modernism, it has also become clear that modernism, as well as rejecting realism, also represented a powerful critique of modernity. Earlier, we defined modernity as

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<sup>66</sup>A. S. Pushkin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, ed. by Maksim Gor'kii, D. D. Blagoi, S. M. Bondi *et al.*, 16 vols (Leningrad: Akademia nauk SSSR, 1937–1959). *Tom tretii: Stikhotvoreniia 1826–1836; skazki*, pp. 30–31, 65.

<sup>67</sup>Susan S. Friedman, *Psyche Reborn: The Emergence of H.D.* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1981) p. 98.

a period mostly identified as modern history which was marked by stable worldviews and teleologies or grand narratives, be it the ebbing Christian grand narrative, or Hegel's historical dialectics, or that of reason, rationalism and enlightenment. Modernist literature, often seeking morality and meaning beyond the rational and material, therefore, deals with issues which are inherently the products of the modern age; the latter aspired to complete rational organisation of the state, society, even of time and of the individual psyche.

### 1.3.2 Postmodernism

Arguably, literary postmodernism succeeds and radicalises literary modernism, as it picks up and further develops modernist themes and techniques. However, it also seems to renounce certain defining aspects of modernism: the search for truth or objective values and for the self, as well as for utopia, the desire for an alternative order. According to Peter Zima, postmodern literature rebels against the 'metaphysical residue' in modernism,<sup>68</sup> given that postmodern literature often appears to renounce such overarching moral seeking for order, by lackadaisically sidelining and ignoring the latter as an unattractive and irrelevant 'no place', *ou topos*. The giving up of metaphysical and epistemological searching in postmodern literature is, therefore, best understood in the postmodern cultural and social context. From a postmodern point of view, the Christian, rationalistic and Marxist grand narratives have lost their appeal; so has teleology in literature, resulting in profound indifference.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup>Peter Z. Zima, *Moderne/Postmoderne: Gesellschaft, Philosophie, Literatur*, 2nd edn (Tübingen and Basel: Francke, 2001), p. 238.

<sup>69</sup>Zima, pp. 237–239, 340–343.

A useful explanation of literary postmodernism has been offered by David Lodge. He proposes that

[p]ostmodernism continues the modernist critique of traditional realism, but it tries to go beyond or around or underneath modernism, which for all its formal experiment and complexity held out to the reader the promise of *a* meaning [...] A lot of postmodernist writing implies that [...] whatever meaningful patterns we discern in it are wholly illusory, comforting fictions. The difficulty, for the reader, of postmodernist writing is not so much a matter of obscurity, which might be cleared up, as of uncertainty, which is endemic.<sup>70</sup>

This ‘uncertainty’ is most visible in the lack of postmodernist narrative continuity, and the use as compositional techniques of contradiction, discontinuity, randomness and excess, which can all also create feelings of bizarreness and absurdity, and which characterise certain works of post-Soviet fiction to be considered in later chapters. The fundamental problem with postmodernist writing is that it typically attempts to short-circuit interpretation ‘in order to administer a shock to the reader and thus resist assimilation into conventional categories of the literary.’<sup>71</sup> This observation may explain why dealing with postmodernist texts is so extremely difficult: they are written with the intent to evade meaning and interpretation. ‘By presenting the reader with more data than he can synthesise, the [postmodernist] discourse affirms the resistance of the world to interpretation.’<sup>72</sup> Lodge understands the act of interpretation of a literary text as a bridge between the gap which separates

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<sup>70</sup>Lodge, p. 12 (emphasis in original).

<sup>71</sup>Lodge, p. 15.

<sup>72</sup>Lodge, p. 14.

the word and the world, art and life. Hence, postmodernism is a kind of metafictional expression of the unintelligibility of the world. Stylistically, these effects may be, among others, achieved by the combination of factual and fictional elements in a text; a foregrounding of questions of authorship and writing; and by using conventions in a way that turns them into a subject matter themselves. While these devices are not exclusively postmodernist, they are used to a greater extent than in other ‘poetics’ and appear to be central to postmodernist writing.<sup>73</sup>

Lodge’s insightful approach to postmodernism as outlined above can fruitfully be expanded by considering Fredric Jameson’s, Linda Hutcheon’s and Brian McHale’s concepts of postmodernism. These will simply be introduced here, and taken up again for development in later chapters. Jameson suggests that in the postmodern scenario as perceived by him, the place of literature seems to have been replaced by the mass-media society of today. Consequently, he bemoans what he regards as the commodification of artistic production and the loss of the distinction between low and high brow art and culture, as well as the advent of empty pastiche, which, in Malpas’s words, is ‘the superficial appropriation of different modes and genres for the generation of its own performative style’.<sup>74</sup> We will return to pastiche as a creative medium that is characteristic of post-Soviet and ‘postmodern’ fiction in Chapter 4.

The second central concern and feature of postmodern literature is identified by Hutcheon as ‘metafictionality’. This concept can be understood as a ‘self-conscious mode of writing, a writing that “meta-fictionally” comments on and investigates its own status as fiction as well as questions our ideas

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<sup>73</sup>Childs, pp. 200–201.

<sup>74</sup>Malpas, p. 25.

of the relation between fiction, reality and truth.<sup>75</sup> However, given that a certain metafictional dimension was also present in previous literary periods, including modernism, we will argue later that metafictionality by itself cannot be an unmistakable marker of postmodernism. Hutcheon also believes that ‘postmodernism is a contradictory cultural enterprise, one that is heavily implicated in that which it seeks to contest. It uses and abuses the key structures and values it takes to task’.<sup>76</sup> This somewhat echoes Zima’s view of postmodernism as partly continuing, and partly rejecting modernism.

The third major approach to postmodernism considered in this work is McHale’s argument that the dominant focus of modernist inquiry on epistemology has shifted with postmodernism towards ontology. This appears to be complementary and correlative to the framework developed so far of understanding postmodernism in terms of its dialogical relationship with modernism where it takes over and develops further modernism’s critique of modernity, whilst rejecting modernism’s metaphysical seeking. Acknowledging that the one in no way excludes the other, and that epistemology and ontology are indeed related, McHale conceptualises the postmodernist relationship between epistemological and ontological concerns as a shift in emphasis: ‘[i]n postmodernist texts, in other words, epistemology is *backgrounded*, as the price for foregrounding ontology.’<sup>77</sup>

Epistemology has rightly been identified as one of modernism’s main obsessions: understanding human nature and reality, the acquisition of knowledge and the search for, and perceived lack of, rational patterns in modern existence, as well as the seeking after metaphysical truth, have been pointed out

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<sup>75</sup>Malpas, p. 26; cf. Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York and London: Routledge, 1988), p. 117.

<sup>76</sup>Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, p. 106.

<sup>77</sup>McHale, p. 11 (emphasis in original).



as key features inherent in modernist literature. Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Ford's *The Good Soldier* and James's *The Turn of the Screw* can be cited as representative examples of the modernists' despair concerning their inability to comprehend the world and the darkness of human nature. Narrators are fickle, confuse facts in their minds and let the readers know about their doubt and lack of knowledge. Narration from different angles increases the sense of uncertainty about the possibilities for seeing and for understanding reality, on the one hand, and in representing it, on the other. A concern with insanity, psychological damage and the unconscious heightens the awareness that there are things which are beyond cognitive comprehension. Ambiguity in plot, structure, narration, time-space organisation and language convey the message that the derivation of meaning is highly problematical.<sup>78</sup> McHale recognises the modernist desire to know, interpret and change the world and advances the hypothesis that postmodernist fiction differs from its modernist predecessor by directing the quest for knowing to a deeper level, that of the very status of a fictional world: 'What is a world? What kinds of world are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?; What happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?''<sup>79</sup> Of course, such features also describe certain modernist works, such as Belyi's novel *Petersburg*, which might be an indication of 'postmodernism' continuing modernist ways of constructing fiction. This is an important issue that is further developed in Chapters 3 and 4.

With respect to genre, tropes, narration, themes, motifs and style, McHale rejects the idea that any of these could be regarded as exclusively postmod-

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<sup>78</sup>Childs, pp. 148–162.

<sup>79</sup>McHale, p. 10.

ernist, or that they could be used retrospectively to define postmodernism. Rather, postmodernist literature shares literary forms and expressions with previous periods of literature, with the difference of appropriating them for ontological purposes. He begins his discussion by pointing out the ontological instability of postmodernist fiction, with regard to narrated fictional ‘worlds’ and sub-worlds. Such a world can be based on a ‘geographical’ *topos* such as a fictional African or American ‘world’, or on an intertextual zone such as ‘transworld identity’, that is a borrowed character,<sup>80</sup> or on a (anti-) utopian or a science-fiction *topos* (McHale describes science-fiction as ‘perhaps *the* ontological genre *par excellence*’ and as ‘postmodernism’s noncanonized or “low art” double’).<sup>81</sup>

Ontology is also foregrounded by letting different ‘worlds’ clash or intrude into each other, such as for instance the fantastic and the real world in Bulgakov’s *The Master and Margarita*, in which a real (although fictionalised) city is taken over by the world of the fantastic. According to McHale, the ontological structure to which the novel witnesses is that of ‘a *dual* ontology, on one side our world of the normal and everyday, on the other side the next-door world of the paranormal or supernatural’.<sup>82</sup> *The Master and Margarita* as well as Andrei Belyi’s *Petersburg*, which will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3, are modernist in essence despite their ontological tension, however, owing to their dominant transcendent dimension, which is

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<sup>80</sup>Napoleon in Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* would be an example of a trans-world character, a character from either the real world and history who appears in fiction, or a character from a piece of fiction who makes his appearance in another piece of literature. Again, this is a good example of most ‘postmodernist’ features having a long literary history. Hence, ‘postmodernism’ is best viewed as making more pronounced, emphatic and concentrated use of traditional literary means which emphasise ontological instability.

<sup>81</sup>McHale, p. 59 (emphases in original).

<sup>82</sup>McHale, p. 73 (emphasis in original).

inter alia indirectly expressed in the epigraph to this chapter.

The same phenomenon is further embodied in, for instance, historical fantasy and ‘creative anachronism’. The former uses real-world figures and appropriates them fictionally, and the latter can be achieved either by giving characters technology at hand which was not available in their real-world time, or by allowing them to share in it through authorial hindsight:

[i]ntegration of the historical and the fantastic, especially integration within a single character, exacerbates the ontological hesitation which is the principle of all fantastic fiction, for here the hesitation is not between the supernatural and the *realistic* but between the supernatural and the historically *real*.<sup>83</sup>

McHale draws attention to a number of further structural devices used by postmodernists to foreground ontology, the following six of which will be sketched out below: narrative self-erasure, Chinese box worlds, language and style, carnival, the printed form of the text, and death. In the first, the process of creating fictional objects and worlds is itself deconstructed. An example of this would be the continual narratorial and/or authorial injunction to ‘scrap that’, to intervene with authorial comments aimed at questioning the narration.

The second device to be looked at is that of *matreshki* or Chinese box worlds, in which, as in the phenomenon of *mise en abyme*,<sup>84</sup> infinite regress or a potentially infinite number of worlds are embedded into one another: the

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<sup>83</sup>McHale, p. 95 (emphases in original).

<sup>84</sup>*Mise en abyme* is defined by the *OED* as a literary critical term denoting ‘self-reflection within the structure of a literary work; a work employing self-reflection’. The term was coined by André Gide to describe the ‘procedure of interior duplication’ in art, i.e. the reproduction of a smaller copy of an image within the latter itself [*Oxford Dictionary of English* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) (Electronic book)].

narrative levels become increasingly hypo-diegetic, that is more and more levels of embedding are added.

Thirdly, the lowest ontological stratum of a literary work is constituted by sound formations and small-scale semantic units; an example of highlighting lexical, phonetical and semantic structures would be traditional puns. Such an approach is intentionally foregrounded in postmodernist literature. Other manifestations of this strategy, which foregrounds the literary process through the creation of different worlds, are the absence of controlling syntax; repetition of words, phrases, sounds, rhymes, etc.; lexical extravagance; nonsemantic or meaningless linguistic structures; non-fluent sentences; abecedary play with letters; heteroglossia<sup>85</sup> and so forth.

Fourthly, McHale points to carnival with its grotesque description of the human body and its functions as a preferred postmodern strategy:

Where the traditional genres of official literature are stylistically homogeneous, carnivalized literature is heterogeneous and flagrantly ‘indecorous,’ interweaving disparate styles and registers. Where the official genres are typically unitary, both generically and ontologically, projecting a single fictional world, carnivalized literature interrupts the text’s ontological ‘horizon’ with a multiplicity of inserted genres — letters, essays, theatrical dialogues, novels-within-the-novel, and so on. Carnivalized literature, in other words, is characterized by stylistic heteroglossia and recursive structure — features we are already familiar with

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<sup>85</sup>The concept of ‘heteroglossia’ was conceived by Bakhtin as ‘concrete social speech diversity’, that is the interwoven use of different styles and registers in a text; it ‘serves as the vehicle for the confrontation and dialogue among world-views and ideologies in the novel, its orchestrated *polyphony* of voices’ [McHale, p. 166 (emphasis in original)]. We will return to this issue in Chapter 4.

in postmodernist fiction.<sup>86</sup>

Let us turn now to the printed form of the text. ‘Concrete prose’ or the spatially conscious ordering or typographical designing of the text on printed paper is another postmodernist strategy for foregrounding the ontological tension between the physical book and the fictional world.

Lastly, McHale argues that postmodernist writing takes a keen interest in the issue of death as the ultimate ontological boundary.<sup>87</sup> Indeed, death is one of the foremost questions and problems raised by postmodern authors and theoreticians. Derrida, for example, claimed to have thought about death almost every day of his life.<sup>88</sup> As Leithart expresses it,

[d]eath is not a postmodern invention, but death is a — no *the* — postmodern obsession, the ultimate negation of the pretensions of modernity, the daily reminder — if we had eyes to see — that we are not in control and that progress, gain, is not inevitable [...] postmodern theory attempts to pay unblinking attention to death — the dying of language on the air, the death of one thought murdered by its successor, the dissolution of every project, the death of each one of us.<sup>89</sup>

Literature appears to correlate with this: alongside love, death has always been a perennial literary theme. In postmodernism, however, death is particularly foregrounded.

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<sup>86</sup>McHale, p. 172.

<sup>87</sup>McHale, pp. 231–232.

<sup>88</sup>Leithart, p. 129.

<sup>89</sup>Leithart, p. 129 (emphasis in original).

## 1.4 Conclusions

The above discussion aspired to understand postmodernism holistically in its interrelated social, cultural, philosophical and literary dimensions, for the purpose of providing a useful, adequate and enlightening framework for analysing contemporary Russian fiction. A number of provisional conclusions can be drawn: postmodernism as a term is far from ideal, in particular with regard to conceptual identification. However, it can be summarised, bearing in mind the many different details and aspects of our presentation above, as a social, philosophical and artistic reaction to what postmoderns perceive as the manifold reductionist, rationalistic and presumptuous nature of modernity. In this it follows and further focuses the critique of modernity which was articulated by aesthetic and literary modernism in late modernity. Whereas this crisis of modernity, legitimisation, and representation finds its reflection in modernist and postmodern literature, the latter arguably rejects modernism's metaphysical quest. Style and literary features in the narrow sense of the word are indicators of postmodernism if they mirror the underlying postmodern complexes of questions, problems and sensibilities. These questions, problems, experiences and sensibilities are all interlinked and can manifest themselves through a variety of (partly modernist, partly postmodernist, partly both) literary strategies. The fiction of Sorokin, Tuckov and Khurgin will be analysed in the light of all this. Before that, it is necessary to look more closely at the problematics of the notion of Russian postmodernism, however, by considering the specifics of Russian modernity and Russian modernism.

## Chapter 2

# Russian Modernity

*Russia has preserved the childhood of Europe; in the overwhelming mass of its peasant population it represents Christian medievalism and, in particular, Byzantine medievalism.*

— Thomáš Garrigue Masaryk, *The Spirit of Russia* (1919)<sup>1</sup>

With a view to establishing how the implied philosophical outlook in post-Soviet fiction relates to postmodernism, and how it may be more usefully discussed in terms of ‘neo-modernism’, the previous chapter identified the nature of postmodernism and of its dialectical engagement with both modernity and modernism: it gives expression to a far-reaching criticism of modernity and its dominant worldviews, marked inter alia by unifying grand narratives and a reductionist philosophical anthropology. The record of a comparable period of modernity in Russia, however, is less straightforward, and with it, also the notion of postmodernism, in so far as it is defined over and against modernity: Russian culture testifies to a greater cultural continuity and resistance to the values of modernity than the West. Certain

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<sup>1</sup>Thomáš Masaryk, *The Spirit of Russia*, trans. by Eden and Cedar Paul, 2 vols (London: Allen & Unwin; New York: Macmillan, 1919), I, p. 5.

aspects of Russian culture that disagree with modern values and which could easily be seen as ‘postmodern’, may be essentially pre-modern, after all. The purpose of the present chapter and its interdisciplinary focus on Russia’s wider cultural history, then, is to shed light on our view of postmodernism ultimately being a misleading concept when applied to the Russian cultural and literary context.

It will be argued in this chapter that the core ideas of modernity, such as rationalism, humanism, individualism and democracy, were resisted by Russia’s preference for traditional Orthodox values such as the exaltation of tradition and community over notions of progress and individuality, the elevation of authority and suffering, and a deeply rooted preference for metaphysical and utopian modes of thinking, resulting in a suspicion of rationalism. Seen individually, such aspects of Russian culture and history may be ambiguous as proof; they can be explained in a variety of ways. But the reader will see the outline of a cumulative body of evidence all pointing in the direction of extraordinary continuity constituting a defining feature of Russian culture, well beyond the realm of chance occurrence. Such a finding supports one of our main lines of thought, namely, that postmodernism may be a delusive concept in relation to Russian culture: Russia never participated fully in those developments of modernity against which postmodernism is considered to be a reaction.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Cf. Mark Lipovetsky, who acknowledges that the trajectory of Russia’s cultural history requires an appreciation of the differences between Western postmodernism and its Russian cousin, which he views as co-existent with Russian cultural continuity, however [*Paralogii: transformatsiia (post)modernistskogo diskursa v kul'ture 1920–2000-kh godov* (Moscow: NLO, 2008), pp. 1–9]. Our own argument diverges from Lipovetsky’s approach, since we suggest that the term ‘neo-modernism’ is better suited than ‘postmodernism’ to carry the idea of subterranean cultural and philosophical continuity in spite of superficial change.



Richard Peace writes that

Russia had experienced no Renaissance, with its rediscovery of classical humanism, with its emphasis on the genius of the individual consciousness. By contrast Russian culture up to the late eighteenth century had been founded on absolutes; the absolute truth and beauty of Orthodoxy, the absolute values of the state.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, however, there are aspects of modern Russian history which, at first glance, suggest that Russia took part in the developments of ‘modernity’, although possibly with some delay and under the influence of somewhat different circumstances.

One example that could be given in support of modernity in Russia could be the historical process of modernisation embodied in the founding of St Petersburg, which Dostoevsky in his *Notes from the Underground* referred to as ‘the most abstract and intentional [*umyshlennyi*] city in the whole world’.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Viacheslav Ivanov viewed the ‘St. Petersburg period’ as the ‘epoch of the great cleavage between actuality and appearance; of a form of consciousness — presumptory and illusory, because its roots in the nation are snapped’,<sup>5</sup> cruelly disconnecting Russia from its Orthodox reality. The city’s founder, Peter the Great, engaged in a radical mobilisation of the people, through comprehensive regimentation and legislation, and brutally and

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<sup>3</sup>Richard A. Peace, ‘Russian Concepts of Freedom’, *Journal of Russian Studies*, 35 (1978), 3–15 (p. 6).

<sup>4</sup>Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from the Underground & The Grand Inquisitor with relevant works by Chernyshevsky, Shchedrin and Dostoevsky*, trans. and introd. by Ralph E. Matlaw (New York, London, Victoria et al.: Meridian, 1991), p. 6 (Part I, Chapter 2 of *Notes from the Underground*).

<sup>5</sup>Viacheslav Ivanov, *Freedom and the Tragic Life: A Study in Dostoevsky*, ed. by S. Konovalov, trans. by Norman Cameron (London: Harvill, 1952), p. 74.

radically changed the course of Russian history. As Pushkin suggested in 1822, ‘Peter I had no fear of the freedom of the people and the unavoidable consequences of enlightenment, since he trusted in his own might and despised humanity, perhaps even more so than Napoleon’.<sup>6</sup> This may be one reason why in 1924 the Symbolist poet Maksimilian Voloshin referred to Peter the Great as the ‘first Bolshevik’ in his poem ‘Russia’ (‘Rossiia’)<sup>7</sup> — and his radical therapy and implicit contempt for man in light of his larger purposes proved to be a historical source both of inspiration and of legitimacy for the Bolsheviks.<sup>8</sup>

All the same, evidence for Russia’s participation in modernity is in actual fact less firm and more questionable than it may appear. A number of phenomena which were defining of modernity in Europe and America did not occur in Russia, or if they did, then only to partial effect: the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, individualism, rationalism, nationalism, and democracy.

## 2.1 Continuity vs. Progress

James Billington argues that the imperial culture of the eighteenth century and the mass culture of the nineteenth century never fully replaced the deep-lying first layer of the Orthodox culture of the Eastern Slavs. Thus, a mediaeval worldview was able to persist in Russia far longer than had been

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<sup>6</sup>A. S. Pushkin, ‘Zametki po russkoi istorii XVIII veka’, in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii. Tom odinnadtsatyi. Kritika i publitsistika 1819–1834*, pp. 14–19 (p. 14) (own translation).

<sup>7</sup>*Neopalimaia kupina: stikhi o voine i revoliutsii* in Maksimilian Voloshin, *Sobranie sochinenii. Tom pervyi. Stikhotvoreniia i poemy 1899–1926*, ed. by V. P. Kupchenko and A. V. Lavrov (Moscow: Ellis Lak 2000, 2003) pp. 219–380 (p. 373).

<sup>8</sup>Leonid Heller and Michel Niqueux, *Geschichte der Utopie in Russland*, trans. Anne Hartmann (Bietigheim-Bissingen: edition tertium, 2003), p. 68.

the case in Western Europe.<sup>9</sup> Uriel Procaccia points out that, arguably, the decisive impetus for modernisation in Russia has always come from above rather than from below, whether in the Petrine or in the Communist era, something that has been commented on by a range of scholars.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, many intellectual developments involving the Russian aristocracy were of no relevance for the peasants in the countryside; even when Empress Catherine corresponded with Voltaire, there was not much benefit from this exchange of Enlightenment ideas for the huge majority of her subjects. Even constitutional reforms and the introduction of a legal system in post-Petrine Russia were more an example of procedure over substance, of empty shells aimed at cementing imperial power.<sup>11</sup> According to Billington, '[u]nder Catherine and Alexander, Russia had moved deep into Europe physically and spiritually but had not equipped itself to share in the political and institutional development of the West.'<sup>12</sup> In addition, throughout the eighteenth century, and well into the nineteenth, Russia experienced a growing spiritual mobilisation across her religious spectrum. The development of the movements of Pietism, Methodism and the Moravian Brethren in Russian Protestantism, and a comparable quickening in spiritual pursuit and thinking in the Catholic and Orthodox Churches, as well as the growth of Masonry, further ingrained hostility towards Enlightenment ideas and rationalism at the level of the aristocracy. This helps explain the lack of interest of the majority of the nobility in reforms during the reign of Alexander I (1801–1825) as well as

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<sup>9</sup>James Billington, *The Face of Russia: Anguish, Aspiration, and Achievement in Russian Culture* (New York: TV Books, 1998), p. 28.

<sup>10</sup>See Epstein, *After the Future*, pp. 188–210, for example.

<sup>11</sup>Uriel Procaccia, *Russian Culture, Property Rights, and the Market Economy* (Cambridge, New York, Melbourne *et al.*: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 95–129.

<sup>12</sup>Billington, *The Icon and the Axe: An Interpretive History of Russian Culture* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966), p. 296.

during Nicholas I's policy of restoration, that persisted despite an emerging current of revolutionary thought and action, which found its expression in the Decembrist uprising of 1825. Also, for obvious reasons, the degree of receptiveness towards Enlightenment ideas was highly dependent on the individual ruler; Paul I (1796–1801), Alexander I (1801–1825), Nicholas I (1825–1855), and later Alexander III (1881–1894) were reactionary in their attempts to neutralise any consolidation of liberal ideation in Russia.<sup>13</sup>

William Leatherbarrow suggests a more positive appraisal of the reactionism of Alexander I and Nicholas I by suggesting the concept of 'conservatism', which he defines as a conviction that preferred continuity over change, and that deemed the preservation of an individual nation's organic cultural and historical traditions legitimate.<sup>14</sup> Russian native cultural continuity is, therefore, a dimension which helps explain why Russian postmodernism is a ques-

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<sup>13</sup>Billington, *The Icon and the Axe*, pp. 269–308.

<sup>14</sup>William Leatherbarrow, 'Conservatism in the Age of Alexander I and Nicholas I', in: *A History of Russian Thought*, ed. by William Leatherbarrow and Derek Offord, (Cambridge, New York, Melbourne *et al.*: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 95–115 (p. 95). It should be added that while the desire to conserve one's national traditions in itself can be appreciated positively, certain such traditions are certainly less complimentary than others. Like virtually all European nations, Russia has a tradition of anti-Semitism, a worldview and policy that gained strength in the late eighteenth and during the nineteenth century. At that time, Russia was home to the largest Jewish population in the world, which was widely perceived as an agent of change and modernisation, and therefore as undermining traditional Russian society. While, of course, anti-Semitism ultimately has its roots in ancient pagan and Christian religious and political rivalry, and subsequently became entrenched in the various branches of Eastern and Western Christianity alike, it became closely associated with anti-modernism in Russia in the nineteenth century, and hence an expression of the desire of parts of Russian society to turn back to traditional social and religious forms of life [see Steven G. Marks, *How Russia Shaped the Modern World* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003), pp. 140–175].

tionable concept: the various aspects of modernity which postmodernism criticises, have arguably long been alien to, and hence resisted by varying, but always significant, parts of Russian society across its social strata.

As a matter of fact, until the nineteenth century, and maybe even as late as the twentieth, it was precisely at the level of the mass of the people that ‘progress’ was resisted. A prime example would be Patriarch Nikon’s church reforms of 1654.<sup>15</sup> Even though the latter added up to arguably little more than minor liturgical, iconographic and in particular service-psalter reforms (directed at a harmonisation with Greek Orthodoxy), quite unlike the Protestant Reformation of more than a century earlier which was concerned with substantive change in church practice and theology, Nikon’s reforms were fundamentally opposed by believers across Russia, who wanted to keep their own Russian version of the Greek faith, rather than bring it in line with Greek Orthodoxy. While the Reformation in Europe originated at the lower level of the church hierarchy and proved successful despite massive institutional opposition, the Russian Orthodox reforms were pushed through by the top, and met intense resistance among the flock. In both instances, dissenters were persecuted and sometimes burned — for contrary reasons, however. In the Protestant Reformation, reformers were persecuted by the clerical hierarchy, whereas during the Orthodox reforms it was the anti-reformers who were persecuted by church and state. Whereas a number of Protestant reformers were burned at the stake because they refused to submit to the clerical authority of Rome, in the case of Nikon’s reforms Orthodox clergymen as well as laypeople died because they, on occasions, burned themselves in protest

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<sup>15</sup>For an authoritative discussion of Nikon’s reform and the ensuing schism, see Sergei A. Zen’kovskii, *Russkoe staroobriadchestvo* (Minsk: Belorusskii Ekzarkhat, 2007); see also Andrei Sinyavsky, *Ivan the Fool: Russian Folk Belief. A Cultural History*, trans. by Joanne Turnbull and Nikolai Formozov (Moscow: Glas, 2007), pp. 208–209.

at top-down reforms which they regarded as satanic and from the antichrist, since they deviated from the revered tradition. A single such example does not add up to a theory or model, of course, but there are many other aspects of the cultural, intellectual, social, political and military development of Russia from the Middle Ages until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, where innovations were pushed through from the top, more often than not against Russia's cultural grain. One might argue that right from Russia's Christianisation by Prince Vladimir in 988 and continuing with Peter the Great and his creation of educational institutions, the progress of civilisation in Russia has been enforced from above rather than being the result of natural development; Russian reality was always subjugated to the 'ideas, schemes, and conceptions' of her rulers.<sup>16</sup>

By comparison, the European Renaissance of the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries constituted an irresistible cultural movement which prepared the way for modernity with its underlying changes in the view of man and the world, laying the ground for what would slowly turn into humanism, individualism, rationalism, and new ideas about the legitimacy of authority and power, and consequently, secularisation. In Russia, no similar development took place, which explains why, according to Billington and Procaccia, the Russia of today has so many problems with instituting a successful market economy and liberal democracy: it has, unlike Europe, no history of underlying values and institutions evolving and becoming ingrained in society over the course of several centuries. Modernity in Russia is like a plant, cut off from its roots, that has been replanted, and, it is hoped, will develop new roots in an alien soil. In those instances in the past where Russia adopted progressive developments from the West, it was largely done superficially,

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<sup>16</sup>Epstein, *After the Future*, pp. 188-210 (p. 191).

accepting a cultural idea without also taking an interest in implementing the values which had led to such a specific model of government or art form arising in the West in the first place.<sup>17</sup>

Despite such complexities, ‘modernity’ cannot, or so it would appear, be completely denied to Russian history. The situation sketched above changed gradually as the eighteenth century advanced: revolutionary thought made its way to Russia, and was facilitated by social changes occurring in Russia, especially the evolution of a new kind of ‘class’ or social group, the *raznochintsy*. Moreover, the intelligentsia displayed an ever-increasing interest in the Russian people and Russian identity. Crucially, the influence of foreign thinkers like Freud, Nietzsche, Darwin and Marx, greatly affected Russia’s intellectual and political development. Apart from insignificant occasions in the past centuries, this was the period when for the first time social change was attempted by educated people and sections of the aristocracy in opposition to the obstructive tactics of rulers. One might argue that this was the belated appearance of modernity in Russia, and it coincided with the period of late modernity in the West. Although the two cultures were distinctly different, they were nevertheless marked by the influence of rationalism and materialism, amongst others, being both exposed to the ideas and philosophies of those thinkers who revolutionised Western thinking and worldview in the nineteenth century.

Moving on into the twentieth century, Soviet Marxism could very well be seen as epitomising the aspirations of modernity outlined earlier: industrialisation, forced collectivisation and the introduction of universal education permeated all spheres of life, including literature and concepts of the hu-

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<sup>17</sup>Procaccia; Billington, *Russia in Search of Itself* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center, 2004), p. 48.

man individual; art and high culture were regarded as a means of raising the masses from the abomination of capitalist exploitation (the fact that the Soviet Union exploited her citizens for her own purposes is another matter to be returned to shortly); official ideology propagated the notion of ‘us’ (that is the USSR as the first proletarian state in the world) achieving a higher place in the development of humanity than ‘them’, the world of bourgeois governments; the same divide existed internally, too: Reds versus Whites, members of the Communist Party or other officially sanctioned organisations versus those who did not join, Soviet citizens who supported communism and those who did not, communists who supported the Party line and communists who disagreed, and so forth. Furthermore, Marxism is by definition an attempt to map reality according to theory; the five-year-plans were extreme examples of the drive for the comprehensive rational ordering and management of human existence; religion was purportedly overcome, while the state, the Party and their representatives became recipients of almost religious worship; metaphorically speaking, the notion of achieving semi-divine control was part of the very fabric of Soviet communist ideology. Furthermore, the notion of the proletarian Soviet Union and its envisaged subsequent worldwide victory was originally and very idealistically thought of as overcoming all those ethnic and religious divisions, which had historically given impetus to so much conflict and suffering on the continent of Europe.

However, are such arguments in support of Russian ‘modernity’ really convincing, or are there countervailing issues that would undermine this conclusion? Answering this question will facilitate our understanding of Russian ‘postmodernism’ and why certain features of Russian culture are perhaps better viewed as being rooted in a pre-modern, rather than expressing a postmodern, worldview. A number of different aspects of Russian and Soviet



history can legitimately be advanced against the notion of Soviet communism having been a period of ‘distilled’ modernity. The first, and maybe most self-evident, aspect, is its ultimate failure. For a period of seventy years, the Soviet leadership attempted to transform society according to its vision of communism, using different strategies and methods, sometimes with a greater, sometimes with a lesser degree of cruelty. If Soviet socialism was, as has been cautiously suggested above, in essence a modern project, then the historical fact of the Soviet Union’s disintegration would also speak of the failure of modernity in Russia.<sup>18</sup>

Let us consider another example: the emergence of nationalism in the nineteenth century and the resulting appearance of modern nation-states all over Europe. Arguably, Russia’s political development as an empire was always state-, and never nation-centered. The historian Geoffrey Hosking and the philosopher Boris Groys both argue that Russia has never been a nation in the modern sense of the word, since the populace of Russia has never developed a coherent national identity and has only begun to do so since the break-up of the supra-national Soviet Union.<sup>19</sup>

A further caveat relates to the observations about Russian history and progress made by Billington and Procaccia outlined earlier, namely: the Russian tendency to adopt products of Western progress without also adapting or developing the values which had provided the soil for the growth of such a cultural or intellectual product. In this regard, Epstein suggests that Russian civilisation has been ‘devoid of both genuine European and intrinsic Russian contents and [it] remain[s] a tsardom of names and outward appear-

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<sup>18</sup>I am indebted to John Simpson for this suggestion.

<sup>19</sup>Geoffrey Hosking, *Russia: People and Empire 1552–1917* (London: HarperCollins, 1997); Boris Groys, *Die Erfindung Rußlands* (Munich: Hanser, 1995), pp. 14–15; cf. Billington, *Russia in Search of Itself*, pp. 19–21.

ances'.<sup>20</sup> He encapsulates this characteristic in his concepts of 'simulacra' and 'hyper-reality'.<sup>21</sup> Epstein, whose understanding of postmodernism relies on Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality and simulation (which we have discussed in Chapter 1), argues that Russian culture has always been typologically postmodern since it gave priority to the production of a sense of reality over reality itself. Epstein also refers to Ivan Aksakov, who argued that in Russia everything is fundamentally counterfeit, intentional, and 'designed for show',<sup>22</sup> and cites the Marquis de Custine, who wrote in 1839 that

Russians have only names for everything, but nothing in reality. Russia is a country of facades. Read the labels — they have 'society,' 'civilization,' 'literature,' 'art,' 'sciences' — but as matter of fact, they don't even have doctors. [...] Well, the entire nation, in essence, is nothing but a placard stuck over Europe...<sup>23</sup>

While Epstein's views seemingly serve us in highlighting the Russian tendency to endorse innovation at the cultural surface only, there will be an opportunity later to question his overarching view of this being reflective of postmodernism.

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<sup>20</sup>Epstein, *After the Future*, p. 192.

<sup>21</sup>Epstein, *After the Future*, pp. 189–197; Epstein, 'The Dialectics of Hyper: From Modernism to Postmodernism', in Epstein, Genis, and Vladiv-Glover, *New Perspectives*, pp. 3–30.

<sup>22</sup>*Materialy dlia fiziologii russkogo obshchestva. Malen'kaia khrestomatiia dlia vzroslykh. Mneniia russkikh o samikh sebe*, ed. by K. Skalkovskii (St Petersburg: Suvorin, 1904), p. 106, cited by Epstein, *After the Future*, pp. 191–192.

<sup>23</sup>Marquis Astolphe de Custine, *Nikolaevskaia Rossiia*, trans. by Ia. Gessen and L. Domger (Moscow: Politicheskaiia literatura, 1990), pp. 94, 156–157, cited by Epstein, *After the Future*, p. 191.

## 2.2 Soviet Marxism

Let us return to the Soviet period. The dimensions of modernity adopted by the Bolsheviks gave only the external appearance of modernity, and arguably not its underlying values. Indeed, apart from the fact that Soviet industrialisation, collectivisation and the five-year-plans were an enforced, top-down, project, rather than the result of natural development, Bolshevism and its subsequent variants, in particular Stalinism, fought with all their might against that most fundamental element in modernity: reason as a dispassionate way of viewing reality. Isaiah Berlin, in his article of 1957 ‘The Silence in Russian Culture’,<sup>24</sup> argued convincingly that doctrine — that is the Marxist-Leninist belief system with its many inherent eschatological and teleological elements — and not reason, lay at the heart of the introduction of communism in Russia. Berlin refers to rational objections to the implementation of communism, which in pre-industrial Russia required a large number of exceptions to communist theory to make it work. Whereas Marxism explained certain Western developments as a result of developed capitalism and industrialisation, Russia, by contrast, had not yet entered a comparable phase. Hence, Russian communism was an artificial and irrational experiment.<sup>25</sup> Berlin wrote that

[t]he imposition of the Bolshevik system upon an economically retarded country is a unique and monstrous monument to the power of a few men’s wills and their sovereign contempt for history and empirical evidence; and a bloodcurdling interpreta-

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<sup>24</sup>Isaiah Berlin, ‘The Silence in Russian Culture’, *Foreign Affairs*, 36 (1957/1958.1), 1–24.

<sup>25</sup>Berlin, ‘Silence’, pp. 22–23.

tion of the Unity of Theory and Practice.<sup>26</sup>

Intimately related to the enlightenment notion of reason is, of course, the idea of the pursuit of ideas, without which neither the Renaissance, nor the Enlightenment, nor subsequent and related concepts such as individualism, rationalism, the inviolability of the person, and the notion of authority and power as rooted in the people, could have developed. In brief, modernity came into existence and flourished in the West because people conceived of certain ideas, and then developed and shared them. This is exactly the element that was missing in the Soviet Union: intellectual activity. Not that there was a lack of ideas appearing among the Soviet populace, on the contrary: they were not allowed to be developed and shared, even in fields far removed from the centres of political power, such as literary criticism. Berlin argued that

Stalin set himself to repress ideas as such — at a very high cost, be it added [...] this was effective in stifling every form of intellectual life [...] For it has crushed the life out of what once was one of the most gifted and productive societies of the world.<sup>27</sup>

Other modern notions and values like rationalism, government serving the people, the inviolability of the person, and freedom were markedly absent in Soviet socialism, or if present, then only as a shell, and not as part of any true homegrown content. Rationalism, to begin with, was supposedly characteristic of communism. Instead, questions concerning the purpose of man were no

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<sup>26</sup>Berlin, 'Silence', p. 23; the notion of 'unity of theory and practice' had been developed by Karl Marx in his *Theses on Feuerbach*, in which he demanded that the philosopher effect change in the world, rather than purely interpret it, i.e. calling for theory to be put into practice. See Andrew Edward, 'A Note on the Unity of Theory and Practice in Marx and Nietzsche', *Political Theory*, 3 (1975), pp. 305–316.

<sup>27</sup>Berlin, 'Silence', p. 19.

longer considered to be moral or political in nature, but were given the status of technical qualities. Berlin pointed out that Stalin charged intellectuals with the task of becoming ‘engineers of the human soul’, Marxism-Leninism became a ‘science’, mechanical and factory vocabulary and imagery permeated official discourse,<sup>28</sup> and also became a key feature of socialist realist literature. Nonetheless, Marxism as implemented in Russia, however much it was wrapped in rational language, remained an essentially metaphysical concept. Berlin rightly referred to Marxism as a ‘vision of the millen[n]ium, disguised as rational doctrine’,<sup>29</sup> and suggested that

[i]t was its own conception of itself that divided Bolshevism so sharply from its parent, Western Marxism — a conception which made it not merely a set of political or social or economic beliefs or policies, but a way of life, all-penetrating and compulsory, controlled by the Party or the Central Committee of the Party in a way for which little authority can be found even in the most extreme pronouncements of Marx or Engels.<sup>30</sup>

Russian culture, even in its arguably most modern phase, preferred to hold on to what appears to be pre-modern elements. This internal and typological stability of worldview in spite of immense outward political change may give reason to suggest that in the Russian context, ‘postmodern’ may truly be ‘pre-modern’, and thereby also modernist, given that like postmodernism, modernism was a counter-reaction to modernity.

Let us turn now to the modern Western principle of power being the result of the people’s dispensation, i.e. the notion of democracy. The latter

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<sup>28</sup>Berlin, ‘Silence’, pp. 5–6, 9.

<sup>29</sup>Berlin, ‘Silence’, p. 9.

<sup>30</sup>Berlin, ‘Silence’, p. 9.

enjoyed currency to a certain degree in Russia after the Russian Revolution, as exemplified by the so-called Workers' Opposition, the political opposition from the right and the cultural and intellectual creativity of the avant-garde, but gave later way to Stalinist terror, purges, executions, and to what Berlin calls 'silence'.<sup>31</sup> Some historians argue that even those early democratic beginnings after the Revolution were, in actual fact, far less democratic than is sometimes assumed; Lenin regarded the *sovety* as being legitimate only if they represented, and subordinated themselves to the Bolshevik will; wherever they did not, for example during the civil war, they were replaced by Military-Revolutionary Councils to further the 'true' cause of the proletariat. Similarly, the revolt of ten thousand sailors in Kronstadt in March 1921 and their demand for *sovet* rule without Bolshevik dictatorship was brutally put down.<sup>32</sup> This concerns the relationship between the people and the state, which was obviously not a modern one: even though Bolshevism promised freedom, in actual fact it exploited the people. Referring to the Stalinist period, Berlin wrote that '[e]conomic exploitation here is conducted under laboratory conditions not conceivable in Western Europe and America.'<sup>33</sup> Moreover, it is not just the state that was not expected to be popularly legitimate, but also the ideology was not meant to serve the people; on the contrary, the people were meant to serve communism. This resulted in 'absolute subservience'<sup>34</sup> on the part of the intelligentsia and most of the rest of the country, as well as the non-existence of a feature that had slowly been emerging in the West, namely civil society, which bestowed increasing freedom on

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<sup>31</sup>Berlin, 'Silence', pp. 7, 12–14.

<sup>32</sup>Dietrich Beyrau, *Petrograd, 25. Oktober 1917: Die russische Revolution und der Aufstieg des Kommunismus* (Munich: dtv, 2001), p. 21; Manfred Hildermeier, *Die russische Revolution 1905-1921* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1989), p. 291.

<sup>33</sup>Berlin, 'Silence', p. 20.

<sup>34</sup>Berlin, 'Silence', p. 14.

people to pursue happiness, self-expression and civil liberty. A democratic government would be expected to realise these values to the benefit of the individual, as much as to that of the whole state. Soviet society, however, was geared towards fulfilling a fundamentally different function: it was ‘organized not for happiness, comfort, liberty, justice, personal relationships, but for combat’,<sup>35</sup> whatever the particular goals of a given period. Hence, Soviet leaders were in the ‘position of army commanders in a war, who realize that unless their troops see a minimum amount of active service, the discipline, the *esprit de corps*, the continued existence of the armies as fighting units cannot be guaranteed.’<sup>36</sup> ‘Freedom’ was a concept that figured prominently in Lenin’s and in Soviet discourse, but mostly, it meant the ‘freedom’ to do what the Party wanted to be done — something that was conceived of as ultimately leading to a state of universal happiness — which is fundamentally different from ‘freedom’ as understood in the West, meaning the liberty and license to pursue whatever an individual perceived as making him happy (the fact that there are recognised limits to this does not change its true nature).<sup>37</sup>

## 2.3 Shell vs. Substance Phenomena

As it seems, there is substantive evidence for the conclusion that Russia has never fully experienced a modernity comparable to that of the West, not even in her apparently most ‘modern’ period, the Soviet era. Whatever elements of modernity were forcibly implanted into Russian culture and society, they concerned only the products of modernity, not the substance without which

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<sup>35</sup>Berlin, ‘Silence’, p. 24.

<sup>36</sup>Berlin, ‘Silence’, p. 24 (emphasis added).

<sup>37</sup>Cf. Berlin, ‘Silence’, p. 6.

those products would never have seen the light of the day. If the Soviet period constituted modernity for Russia, then only with regard to phenomena on its outward shell. Even Marxism was an intellectual product imported from the West and made use of in Russia far more naïvely and radically than in the places where it had first emerged. Moreover, in further questioning the concept of Russian ‘modernity’ and ultimately also that of Russian ‘post-modernism’, there is one significant aspect that still needs to be discussed: that of Russian cultural continuity in despite of all external ruptures. This will now be looked at in relation to distinctly Russian ways of regarding art, literature, freedom and thought.

## 2.4 Cultural Continuity

An appreciation of the Russian cultural preference for continuity may also help our understanding of why it was that the Old Believers rejected Nikon’s reforms: in Russian Orthodoxy, progress and change possess no intrinsic value.<sup>38</sup> On the contrary, unsolicited progress and change have been signs of the antichrist, of the looming apocalypse, to be feared, prevented and fled from at all costs, necessitating communal withdrawal at best and justifying self-immolation through burning at worst.<sup>39</sup>

Russian Orthodoxy, as one of the main carriers of Russian culture through-

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<sup>38</sup>Kallistos Ware, *The Inner Kingdom* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2000), pp. 181–192; Procaccia, p. 90; James R. Payton Jr., *Light from the Christian East: An Introduction to the Orthodox Tradition* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2007), pp. 87–89.

<sup>39</sup>Cf. Sinyavsky, *Ivan the Fool*, pp. 299–310; Basil Lourié, ‘Russian Christianity’, *The Blackwell Companion to Eastern Christianity*, ed. by Ken Perry (Malden, MA, Oxford and Victoria: Blackwell, 2007), pp. 207–230 (pp. 220–223); Tatiana Filosofova, *Geistliche Lieder der Altgläubigen in Russland* (Vienna, Cologne and Weimar: Böhlau, 2010).



out the centuries, has doubtlessly played a major role in perpetuating certain Orthodox values and attitudes in Russia's wider culture, whether directly or indirectly. While the Russian Revolution brought an end to the church's active role in society and culture, the values which it had promoted remained deeply ingrained. Daniel Rancour-Laferriere, for example, points to the existence throughout the centuries of a culture of *smirenie* ('humility') in Russia, a value imparted by Christianity and perpetuated by the Orthodox church and political and social structures, resulting in the establishment of what he terms a 'slave soul', which in its own turn facilitated authoritarianism in Russia;<sup>40</sup> this will be discussed at length in Chapter 6.

It has been argued by Procaccia that, unlike the numerous artistic styles that developed in the West, ranging from mediaeval art to the Renaissance and romanticism and so forth, Russia has in fact never known any other art form than that of the icon. Much Soviet art relied on secularised iconographic principles, for example sometimes portraying the leaders in a Christ-like guise.<sup>41</sup> While it may be countered that in the Soviet Union, which harnessed art to ideological purpose, iconographic principles were purposely used in order to reach the people through a medium with which it was familiar, the fact that it was realised that the icon is, more than any other artistic medium, the one which the Russian people understood — and accepted as carrying a transcendent value beyond that as a mere 'work of art' — tes-

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<sup>40</sup>Daniel Rancour-Laferriere, *The Slave Soul of Russia: Moral Masochism and the Cult of Suffering* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1995).

<sup>41</sup>See Procaccia, pp. 13–17, for a discussion of examples of Soviet art exhibiting such characteristics, such as Eisenstein's film *Battleship Potemkin* or the piece of plaster art 'We Swear to You, Comrade Lenin' of 1949, which portrays a reverent crowd in front of a tribune on Red Square before the Kremlin walls, with Stalin standing on the tribune below an engraved image of Lenin, graciously addressing the people and bestowing his presence upon them.

tifies to the persistence of such an iconographic understanding of art well into the twentieth century.<sup>42</sup> Further examples would be the abstract artists Kazimir Malevich and Vasilii Kandinskii, who were very much rooted in the iconographic tradition. Kandinskii, in his 1912 work *On the Spiritual in Art*, expressed the view that his abstract art was not aesthetically motivated at all, but that its colour and form were a 'language' or 'music' which narrated and caused the viewer to respond emotionally. Icon paintings were intended to deliver a non-pictorial message,<sup>43</sup> and Kandinskii viewed his creative activity along similar lines. Kandinskii did not wish to distance himself from mimesis because he believed that beauty of expression was an aim in itself; rather, his interest consisted in a dialogue with the viewer.<sup>44</sup> He criticised the art 'connoisseur' whose focus on formal characteristics kept him from perceiving the spirit of 'purposeful creation' in the light of 'a new spiritual realm':<sup>45</sup> '[d]azzled by external devices, his spiritual eye is unable to seek out what it is that lives by these means'.<sup>46</sup>

Iconographic principles deeply influenced the thinking and work of Malevich and Kandinskii, therefore. One of the core characteristics of icon-painting is identified by Procaccia as

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<sup>42</sup>Cf. Billington, *The Face of Russia*, pp. 64–65.

<sup>43</sup>For a discussion of the Orthodox icon, see Sinyavsky, *Ivan the Fool*, pp. 220–221; and Leonid Ouspensky, 'The Meaning and Content of the Icon', in *Eastern Orthodox Theology: A Contemporary Reader*, ed. by Daniel B. Clendenin, 2nd edn (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), pp. 33–63.

<sup>44</sup>Procaccia, pp. 18–19.

<sup>45</sup>Vasilii Kandinsky, 'On the Spiritual in Art and Painting in Particular', 2nd edn (Munich, Piper: 1912), in: Kandinsky, *Complete Writings on Art. Volume One: 1901–1921*, ed. by Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo (London: Faber & Faber, 1982), pp. 120–219 (p. 219).

<sup>46</sup>Kandinsky, 'On the Spiritual in Art', p. 202.

the assumption that the phenomenal world cannot be captured by artistic means and conveyed to the viewer ‘as [it] is.’ The artist cannot, and is not allowed to, observe external objects with the eyes of the flesh. He is required to look into his own soul for spiritual communion with God’s creation. Realism must be discarded as [a] heretical attempt to revoke this principle, and hence all Russian iconography is two-dimensional, stylized, spiritual, transcendent, and unrealistic.<sup>47</sup>

Essentially, iconographic representation is an indirect one, highlighting the ‘sharp distinction between objects and their representation’.<sup>48</sup> In his essay ‘The Artist’, Malevich himself wrote that ‘I imagine a world of inexhaustible unseen forms [...] The artist uncovers the world and shows it to man’.<sup>49</sup> In another short piece, ‘I am the Beginning’, he explained why the artist’s expression of a certain non-realistic world is of significance: ‘that which at present is mysterious will later be clearer than the sun’.<sup>50</sup> Elsewhere, he stated that the ‘Suprematists have deliberately given up objective representation of their surroundings in order to reach the summit of the true “unmasked” art and from this vantage point to view life through the prism of pure artistic feeling’.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>47</sup>Procaccia, p. 20.

<sup>48</sup>Procaccia, pp. 20–21.

<sup>49</sup>Kazimir S. Malevich, *The Artist, Infinity, Suprematism: Unpublished Writings 1913–33*, trans. by Xenia Hoffmann, ed. by Troels Andersen (Copenhagen: Borgen, 1978), IV, p. 9.

<sup>50</sup>Malevich, *The Artist, Infinity, Suprematism*, p. 13.

<sup>51</sup>Kazimir Malevich, *The Nonobjective World*, trans. by Howard Dearstyne (Chicago: Theobald, 1959), pp. 61–100, in *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics*, ed. by Herschel Chipp (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1968), pp. 337–346 (p. 344).

The icon consists of a certain material and a specific artistic form in order to embody the representation of an immaterial, non-objective, spiritual reality. Malevich and Kandinskii, despite their modernist abstract forms, because of which they are regarded as representatives of modernism, typologically followed the Orthodox iconographic concept of art. Perhaps this gives reason for re-evaluating the notion of ‘modernism’ in Russia, given that external, formal innovation can deflect awareness from the question of what lies, in terms of meaning, behind the vehicle of a painting or a literary text. We will return to this issue in a subsequent chapter when we offer thoughts relating to the nature of literary modernism and ‘postmodernism’.

Before doing so, however, there are more examples of cultural continuity reaching even into the post-Soviet era that need to be examined, some of which are no less rooted in Russian Christianity than that of the icon. They all express a deep longing for a sure truth, real community and for transcending the limitations of social reality in Russia. Russian intellectual life has arguably always been dominated by religious, and later also secular, utopian and eschatological ideas, reaching an apogee with its ready embracing of communist utopia.<sup>52</sup> Another theme to be returned to affirmatively in later parts of the present work is the proposition that throughout the history of Russian thought and literature, men of letters have always been specifically concerned about the state and destiny of their own nation as well as that of humanity more generally. Isaiah Berlin, referring to this as ‘acute self-consciousness’, wrote that

[t]here has surely never been a society more deeply and exclusively preoccupied with itself, its own nature and destiny. From the eighteen-thirties until our day the subject of almost all critical

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<sup>52</sup>See, for example, Heller and Niqueux, *Geschichte der Utopie in Russland*.

and imaginative writing in Russia is Russia. The great novelists, and a good many minor novelists too, as well as the vast majority of characters in Russian novels, are continuously concerned not merely with their purposes as human beings or members of families or classes or professions, but with their condition or mission or future as Russians, members of a unique society with unique problems.<sup>53</sup>

In later chapters it will be demonstrated that this statement, made in 1957 and referring to the preceding hundred-thirty years (and most likely accounting for a period stretching even further back into history), still holds true today. As such it is one of a number of indications speaking of cultural continuity in Russia despite all external ruptures, and by extension militates against the straightforward application of terms like ‘modernism’ or ‘post-modernism’ relative to Russian culture.

A further issue to be briefly addressed is that of the shared belief that human purpose has an absolute, total, even religious nature. The fact that such an attitude was deeply ingrained in Russian thinking was one of the reasons why it was possible for a totalitarian system to develop later on Russian soil. Such an all-embracing notion of life involved the acceptance of central authority as arbiter of absolute truth, be it the church or the communists in the twentieth century. A Western concept of the inviolability of persons was hardly likely to develop in Russia against the background of such a view of life; for Russians, such a view would have been tantamount to *meshchanstvo* (petty bourgeois philistinism), *nepravda* (falsehood) and *krivda* (wrong, crookedness)<sup>54</sup> and an ‘effort to limit, to narrow, to conceal, to

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<sup>53</sup>Berlin, ‘Silence’, p. 1.

<sup>54</sup>James Billington, ‘The Renaissance of the Russian Intelligentsia’, *Foreign Affairs*, 36

shut out the light, to preserve privilege, to protect some portion of ourselves from the universal truth—and therefore the central source of error, weakness, and vice.’<sup>55</sup> Russia’s intelligentsia has arguably always been driven by the search for the ultimate truth; Berlin saw evidence for this in the enthusiastic welcome given to a number of notions from the West by the Russian intellectual classes, and the extent to which such ideas were radicalised to a far greater degree than in the West. They became doctrines and ‘fighting faiths’, whereas in the West they usually declined and were simply replaced by new ideas. In Russia the Western ideas like those of Rousseau, Saint Simon, Hegel, Comte, Darwin etc., and eventually of Marx, were transformed into secular theologies. In Russia, argues Berlin, an intellectual concept never remained just that, but frequently acquired a metaphysical, religious dimension.<sup>56</sup> It may be that the Russian tradition of belief in a simple ideology or system as offering all-embracing ‘salvation’ even facilitated the early post-Soviet fascination with capitalism, of which more will be said in our discussion on Tuchkov in Chapter 6.

Another field in which Russia has followed its own distinct path concerns the nature of freedom. We shall argue later that the thematicisation of freedom in such writers as Khurgin, Sorokin and Tuchkov is thematically largely congruent with the Russian classical tradition. Much has been written about the specificity of the Russian notion of freedom, of course, and there is no need to recapitulate fully that body of scholarship here. In essence, the Russian concept of freedom differed from that in the West. Whereas the latter tended to focus on individual, human and citizens’ rights, the former

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(1956/1957.1), 525–530 (p. 528).

<sup>55</sup>Berlin, ‘Silence’, p. 5.

<sup>56</sup>Berlin, ‘Silence’, pp. 2–5; Billington, ‘The Renaissance of the Russian Intelligentsia’, p. 528.

has society as its most important reference point. Richard Peace, in his 1978 article ‘Russian Concepts of Freedom’,<sup>57</sup> argues that in spite of the growing interest in Russia from the eighteenth century on in the serf as a fellow human being, evident in sentimentalism and romanticism, it cannot be truly compared to the Western notions of the freedom of the individual.<sup>58</sup> The reason for why the notion of individual freedom has not properly taken root in Russian culture, is that it was subordinate to the rival notion of absolute truth, a notion that has defined Russian culture, society and politics right into the twentieth century, as we have discussed above. This is an important further indication suggesting that modernity in Russia was indeed much less like its Western kind.

Relative to the cultural explosion that took place in Russia during the nineteenth century, Peace employs the term Renaissance with a capital letter; however, it might better be replaced with a lower case renaissance, thereby describing a cultural *explosion* rather than a distinct cultural *evolution* that is inescapably associated with humanism, the Reformation, and resulting political and social change, since Russia participated in such developments only superficially, at best. Procaccia points out that Renaissance humanism was interested in ‘the nongeneric, individual differences that set people apart from each other [...] [in] the unique, the different, the idiosyncratic of each person’s sphere of existence’.<sup>59</sup> In contrast, even the Russian sentimentalist and romanticist concern with ‘individualism’ appears to have been less individualistic and non-generic than what is understood by this concept in the West. Andreas Schönle writes that ‘Russian sentimentalism failed to adopt some essential tenets of western Enlightenment and sentimentalist thinking,

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<sup>57</sup>Peace, ‘Russian Concepts of Freedom’, 3–15.

<sup>58</sup>Peace, p. 6.

<sup>59</sup>Procaccia, p. 62.

while radicalising others',<sup>60</sup> further highlighting the fact that, on the socio-cultural level, individualism and self-fashioning in Russia were curtailed by 'collective constructions of identity'.<sup>61</sup> In addition, he points to the broader religious and philosophical dimension of Russian-Orthodox culture, which proved to be unreceptive to the notion of the autonomous and subjectivist self.<sup>62</sup> While the Renaissance was characterised by man's assertion of his free agency, thereby breaking with the mediaeval view of personality as being corporatively bound,<sup>63</sup> the evidence in Russian culture seems, therefore, to suggest a stronger continuity with a mediaeval philosophical anthropology. On the other hand, Gareth Jones argues that the Enlightenment faith in reason exercised a pervasive influence on Russia's educated elite of the eighteenth century.<sup>64</sup> At the same time, however, Jones acknowledges evidence to the effect that even 'the outstanding personalities of the Enlightenment in Russia rarely accepted the spirit of western individualism and the political conclusions that flowed from it.'<sup>65</sup> Without a strong notion of individualism, there can be no liberal tradition as conceptualised in the West.

Peace emphasises the fact that in the Russian literary tradition, from Pushkin and Lermontov to Dostoevsky, Zamiatin and Gor'kii, freedom (*volia*, which also translates as 'will') is both etymologically and philosophically connected with the individual *and* society. Pushkin's poem *Tsygany* (*The*

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<sup>60</sup>Andreas Schönle, 'The Scare of the Self: Sentimentalism, Privacy, and Private Life in Russian Culture, 1780–1820', *Slavic Review*, 57 (1998), 723–746 (p. 725).

<sup>61</sup>Schönle, p. 746.

<sup>62</sup>Schönle, p. 746.

<sup>63</sup>Aron J. Gurevich, *Categories of Medieval Culture*, trans. by G. L. Campbell [London, Boston, Melbourne and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1992 (first published as *Kategorii srednevekovoi kul'tury*, Moscow, 1972)], pp. 85–86.

<sup>64</sup>W. Gareth Jones, 'Russia's Eighteenth-century Enlightenment', in: *A History of Russian Thought*, pp. 73–94.

<sup>65</sup>Jones, p. 78.



*Gypsies*) presents freedom as a form of punishment, in that the hero Aleko, who does not wish to submit to and become integrated with the small gipsy social group, is free to leave at the cost of being excluded from them. Essentially, Aleko seeks freedom from commitment and social obligation, an attitude which amounts to pure egotism and unrestrained exercise of the will, something which can only be indulged outside society; at the same time, social exclusion is a kind of punishment ordained by the gypsies following a crime which he committed in his pursuit of freedom. This reflects a matter of fact, namely that human beings are essentially relational creatures, and that exclusion from human intercourse can indeed be form of punishment, for whatever reason. Lermontov, Dostoevsky, Zamiatin, Gor'kii and Leonov moreover went on to present freedom as intricately linked to crime (Zamiatin, however, does so ironically in *We*); such works as *A Hero of our Time*, *Crime and Punishment* and *The Devils*, *Chelkash* and *The Thief* imply that freedom, understood as the relentless pursuit of one's own will (*volia*), eventually leads to crime and, ultimately, to social exclusion, unhappiness and even self-destruction (pp. 7–11). This idea has been well formulated by Terry Eagleton, who, referring to the contemporary West, writes that '[s]ince limits make us what we are, the idea of absolute freedom is bound to be terroristic';<sup>66</sup> Rowan Williams, meanwhile, interprets the pursuit of *volia* in Dostoevsky's fiction as empty and self-destructive:

the dream of a liberty completely without constraint from any other, human, subhuman or divine; because it has no 'other,' it can also have no content. But this means that the hunger for such freedom can only manifest itself in destruction, flinging

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<sup>66</sup>Terry Eagleton, *Holy Terror* (Oxford, New York, Auckland *et al.*: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 71.

itself against existing limits; and when those limits are destroyed, it has to look around for more ‘others’ to annihilate, culminating in self-destruction.<sup>67</sup>

The emphasis on social responsibility is central to the Russian notion of freedom. This is further illuminated by peasant attitudes to the land they ploughed. The latter was of more relevance to them than being spared the condition of serfdom — they would still have been subjects of the *tsar* or *imperator* in any case. The landlords had an obligation to care for their serfs, a theme which is echoed in Dostoevsky’s ‘Grand Inquisitor’ and which in inverted ways will be returned to in our analysis of Tuchkov’s stories below. The freedom which the peasants desired was a ‘freedom within the framework of a tightly knit social organization’;<sup>68</sup> and in Chekhov’s play *Cherry Orchard*, liberation for the serfs is referred to by Firs as *neschast’e* (‘misfortune’);<sup>69</sup> here again one encounters the notion of freedom as leading straight to unhappiness.

Throughout this discussion, we have referred to different Western values developing during the Renaissance and the Enlightenment and embodying ‘modernity’ in general, values which Russia had arguably not developed or at least to a significantly less extent. At the same time, it could also be argued that the West, during this period, had forsaken or diluted a number of original, often Christian, values, which Russia, on the other hand, had retained throughout the centuries.<sup>70</sup> This proposition would be in line with

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<sup>67</sup>Rowan Williams, *Dostoevsky: Language, Faith and Fiction* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008), p. 11.

<sup>68</sup>Peace, p. 12.

<sup>69</sup>Peace, p. 12.

<sup>70</sup>Cf. John Meyendorff, ‘Doing Theology in an Eastern Orthodox Perspective’, in *Eastern Orthodox Theology: A Contemporary Reader*, pp. 79–96 (pp. 91–92).

observations made earlier about the Russian Orthodox Church and the traditional violent resistance of the Russian people towards any kind of change that was deemed unhealthy. Even though the initial theological nature of values such as *smirenie*, *sobornost'*, the 'constructive' or socially located notion of freedom and the inclination towards eschatological and utopian thinking and belief, have been eroded, they still appear to exist as cultural phenomena which have played a role in the course which Russian history has taken during the twentieth century.

Let us consider one further area where Russia has undergone a different development from that of the West, namely the realm of rationalism. In Chapter 1, rationalism and the notion of rationally ordering life and the world was identified as a defining feature of modernity. In Russia, however, rationalism has not been similarly elevated as a value to be pursued; rather, Russian culture, thinkers and writers have arguably been imbued with a pronounced distrust of the notion. Whether such an attitude has been fed by Orthodoxy is again a question to which this thesis can offer no final answers, although it may be stated that there are aspects which appear to point in such a direction. Isaiah Berlin, for example, emphasised the fact that an intellectual tradition comparable to that of the Western churches (which gave birth to the early universities in Western Europe) was conspicuously lacking amongst the Russian priesthood,<sup>71</sup> and it is a commonplace that that which is mysterious and rationally inexplicable plays a larger role in Orthodoxy than in Western theology;<sup>72</sup> the result has been that, despite the views of a minority of intellectual radicals from the eighteenth century onwards, Russia has never, on the whole, subscribed to the notion of *cogito ergo sum* as a way

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<sup>71</sup>Berlin, p. 3.

<sup>72</sup>Payton, pp. 30–31, 72–78; cf. Lourié, 'Russian Christianity', pp. 227, 384.

of life. The Russian traditions of *iurodstvo* (holy foolishness) and superstition at the popular level, and the relevance of esoteric and mystical ideas to the intellectual elite,<sup>73</sup> bear witness to this.<sup>74</sup>

In Chapter 1 we encountered the notion that modernism as an artistic movement and literary period in the West can be viewed as a reaction to, or ‘conversation’ with, modernity’s infatuation with reason and rationalism, as an attempt to bring mankind back into balance, as it were, by restoring the irrational and transcendent to the philosophical anthropology of the time. While this may well hold true for certain phenomena in Western modernism, does it also apply to the case of Russian ‘modernism’? At first sight, Russian modernism, which will be dealt with more extensively in the chapter to follow, does display a similar, perhaps even stronger interest in the metaphysical and non-rationalistic; however, it is being argued here that this may not be so much a reaction to the predominance of modern rationalism as in the West, as a sign of continuity in Russian literature and thought throughout the centuries. After all, irrational, transcendent and fantastic motifs appear not only in the works of Blok, Belyi, Zamiatin and Bulgakov, but also in those of Pushkin, Gogol’ and Dostoevsky. Since so much has been written

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<sup>73</sup>Cf. Billington, *Russia in Search of Itself*, pp. 57–59.

<sup>74</sup>For a more detailed discussion of scepticism towards rationalism as a defining feature of Russian culture, v. Daniel B. Clendenin, *Eastern Orthodoxy: A Western Perspective*, 2nd edn (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), pp. 48–55; Procaccia, pp. 189–245; cf. also Nikolai Berdiaev’s view of rationalism: ‘[r]ationalism, legal formalism, liberalism, democratism are all forms of thought and life which are built on the premise that Truth cannot be apprehended and that, perhaps, there is no Truth; they do not want to know Truth. Truth is unification, and not separation and differentiation’ [Nikolai Berdiaev, ‘Novoe srednevekov’e: razmyshlenie o sud’be Rossii i Evropy’, *Nikolai Berdiaev: Filosofii tvorchestva, kul’tury i iskusstva v dvukh tomakh*, ed. by R. A. Gal’tseva (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1994), I, 406–437 (p. 417)] (own translation).

about Dostoevsky's criticism of rationalism,<sup>75</sup> it will suffice here to point to the fact that Dostoevsky's profound hesitation about rationalism as an ordering principle significantly pre-dates the period of Russian modernism and would, indeed, suggest rather the distinctly Russian tradition of concern with a life focussed not solely on material and rational aspects. Again this would invite conclusions to the effect that Russian modernism's interest in the transcendent lay not so much in a reaction to a modernity which Russia has arguably never properly experienced, as in a unique, Orthodoxy-inspired Russian outlook on the world and on life, one which has continuously valued the mysterious. The fact that the period of Russian modernism witnessed a significant growth of that interest in the metaphysical need not contradict the claim that it has always been an important dimension of Russian culture. Dostoevsky presented life governed by purely rational principles as terror and death; in *Notes from the Underground* the hero's life fails through his submission to natural laws: 'two times two makes four is, after all, something insufferable. . . Two times two makes four is a fop standing with arms akimbo barring your path and spitting', whereas 'two times two makes five is sometimes also a very charming little thing'.<sup>76</sup> Procaccia, referring to the character Orlov in Dostoevsky's *The House of the Dead*, suggests that the author's intention is to show that 'the defiance of the mechanical laws of nature ought to be pursued in spite of their irrationality, and solely for the sake of gaining spiritual, not temporal, salvation'.<sup>77</sup> Nikolai Berdiaev also

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<sup>75</sup>For a discussion of Dostoevsky's anti-rationalism and its influence on modernist literature and thought in the West and the wider world, see Marks, pp. 58–101.

<sup>76</sup>Dostoevsky, *Notes from the Underground*, trans. by Matlaw, p. 30 (Part I, Chapter 9); cf. Procaccia, p. 222, and Richard Peace, *Dostoevsky's Notes from the Underground* (London: Bristol, 1993), pp. 26–20.

<sup>77</sup>Procaccia, p. 223; Dostoevskii, *Sobranie sochinenii v desiati tomakh. Tom tretii. Unizhennye i oskorblennye. Zapiski iz mertvogo doma*, ed. by A. S. Dolinin, L. P. Gross-

perceived Dostoevsky's work (along with that of Gogol' and Tolstoy) as being in disagreement with the modern notion of humanism and therefore also with rationalism. Berdiaev argued that:

Dostoevsky's entire dialectic is aimed against the essence of humanism. His own tragic humanism is deeply opposed to that historical humanism on which Renaissance history was founded, and which the great humanists of Europe professed.<sup>78</sup>

The works of the Russian writers Evgenii Zamiatin and Daniil Kharms more than half a century later reveal similar anti-rationalistic concerns, which will preoccupy us in the next chapter.

Let us conclude this section by referring once again to the ideas of Mikhail Epstein. We have already attended to his model of Russian culture as being founded on simulacra; whatever modern developments Russia appropriated were only shell phenomena which did not penetrate Russia's inner culture. Epstein's observations in this regard are in harmony with the present discussion, though he draws opposite conclusions. Russian culture and society, it can be argued, have never been truly 'modern' and have, therefore, never participated in the intellectual developments of the West to a degree that would justify attributing the notion of Renaissance or modernity to them; Epstein's reference to simulacra in this context, while helping to illustrate the difference between superficial borrowing of a cultural product and lack of cultural groundedness of the product in question, is ultimately ahistorical, and therefore also specious, as is his implicit conclusion that Russian culture has

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man, V. V. Ermilov *et al.* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1957), pp. 387–702.

<sup>78</sup>Berdiaev, 'Konets Renessansa i krizis gumanizma. Razlozhenie chelovecheskogo obraza', *Nikolai Berdiaev: Filosofiia tvorchestva, kul'tury i iskusstva*, I, pp. 392–406 (pp. 405–406) (own translation).

always been ‘postmodern’ in nature. This stricture applies even more to his assertion that ‘Soviet Marxism was the ultimate postmodern achievement.’<sup>79</sup> Soviet Marxism was, after all, neither truly modern, nor postmodern. Postmodernism recognises no utopias or grand narratives, whereas Soviet Marxism can be differentiated from Marx’s initial, analytical theories precisely by virtue of its utopian nature.

## 2.5 Conclusions

The present discussion has attempted to show how very thin the notion of ‘modernity’ is when historically and typologically applied to Russia. Furthermore, if postmodernism is, albeit in part, to be defined through its relationship with modernity, then the concept of postmodernism in relation to Russia is questionable as well. I have argued that, in modern history, Russia underwent a number of periods of modernisation, often modelled on the West, but without experiencing the gradual homegrown social and cultural change which gave rise to these developments in the West in the first place. Therefore, since Russian modernity was only ‘superficially’ experienced during the Soviet period, Russian ‘postmodernism’ is best approached as a reaction to the Soviet period specifically, rather than to modernity in general. In this sense, what is often dubbed ‘Russian postmodernism’ might, therefore, be even better designated as simply ‘post-Soviet’, an epithet that more clearly identifies the Soviet socialist project (with its effects on culture and literature) as its main reference point. I have further suggested that, therefore, rather than applying Western concepts of progress as an inherently positive value, and of distinct periods and changes, it might, after all,

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<sup>79</sup>Epstein, *After the Future*, p. 205.

be more helpful to approach developments in Russian art and literature from the angle of their underlying, internal continuity, one marked by continued moral and eschatological seeking, in spite of any apparent external and formal innovations, which are arguably only surface phenomena.

The next chapter will investigate Russian modernism as well as aspects of long-term cultural continuity, in particular as this relates to Russian 'post-modernism' and post-Soviet fiction.



## Chapter 3

# Russian Modernism

*He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God  
has done from beginning to end.*

— Ecclesiastes 3. 11 (NIV)

In the previous chapter, we sketched the relationship of Russian ‘post-modernism’ with modernity as one which suggests circumspection regarding the adequacy of both terms in the Russian context. It is now time to turn to a discussion of the period of Russian modernism, again in order to offer an evaluation of its relationship with the concept of ‘postmodernism’ and with the post-Soviet period, and thereby proposing the alternative concept of post-Soviet ‘neo-modernism’.

Before beginning the discussion proper, it will be useful to point to a number of definitional and terminological problems relative to modernism in the Russian context. Roger Keys, for example, points out that four of the terms most commonly used by critics to denote this period — Symbolism, Modernism, avant-garde and ‘Silver Age’ — are wanting both typologically and from the literary-historical point of view.<sup>1</sup> Each of these four terms men-

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<sup>1</sup>Roger J. Keys, ‘Symbolism and After: Problems of Literary Terminology in the

tioned above has its own particular limitations: the term ‘Symbolism’, apart from its very insufficiency as qualifying a distinct concept, can be misleading since it frequently meant different things to different Symbolists themselves. Furthermore, the vagueness of the term can cause difficulties of labelling and categorisation when ascribing individual authors or works to the Symbolist movement. ‘Modernism’ spelled with a capital letter as a concept describing an entire literary-historical period is, in a way, too presumptuous, since it implies sweeping assertions about the works which it purports to comprise without giving sufficient credit to the fact that there is far less coherence and unity among the writers and works of the period than it assumes. The newer concept of ‘avant-garde’, used by Aleksandar Flaker<sup>2</sup> and Natal’ia Krylova,<sup>3</sup> for example, lacks sufficiently clear definition.<sup>4</sup> Hesitation about the term

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Study of Turn-of-the-Century Russian Literature’, *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 31 (1995), 359–367. Ronen Omry has also presented the case against the use of ‘Silver Age’, among other reasons owing to its scarce usage during the period [Ronen Omry, *The Fallacy of the Silver Age in Twentieth-Century Russian literature* (Amsterdam: OPA, 1997)]. The term *Serebrianyi vek* was probably used for the first time by Vladimir Piast in his *Encounters (Vstrechi)* of 1929 to describe Russian modernism [Vladimir Piast, *Stikhotvoreniia. Vospominaniia* (Tomsk: Vodolei, 1997), pp. 155–156].

<sup>2</sup>Aleksandar Flaker, ‘Das Problem der russischen Avantgarde’, in *Von der Revolution zum Schriftstellerkongreß: Entwicklungsstrukturen und Funktionsbestimmungen der russischen Literatur und Kultur zwischen 1917 und 1934*, ed. by Gernot Erler, Pleier and Ulrich Bamborschke (Berlin, 1979), pp. 161–203; cf. also Flaker, ‘Die Straße: Ein Mythos der Avantgarde: Majakovskij, Chlebnikov, Krleža’, in *Mythos in der slawischen Moderne*, Wiener Slawistischer Almanach: Sonderband 20 (Vienna, 1987), pp. 139–155.

<sup>3</sup>Natal’ia Krylova, in *Mednyi vek: ocherk teorii i literaturnoi praktiki russkogo avantgarda. Uchebnoe posobie* (Petrozavodsk: KGBU, 2002), suggests the term ‘Bronze Age’ as concept synonymous with that of ‘avantgarde’, which she takes to imply certain philosophical parallels with the ‘Golden Age’, and as comprising the *Oberiu* and poets and writers like Akhmatova, Esenin, Maiakovskii and Platonov.

<sup>4</sup>Keys, ‘Symbolism and After’, p. 364. Dennis Ioffe points out that the term ‘avant-

‘Silver Age’ is grounded in the fact that it never enjoyed any currency in the Russia of the time which it purports to describe, and even where it was used beginning in the late 1920s, this was done with different implied meanings.<sup>5</sup> Keys suggests that, as a result, a lower case ‘modernism’ might be the least problematic concept in terms of typological definition, since it can embrace those ‘distinctive and, to a large extent, novel qualities held in common by a substantial group of works written during the period.’<sup>6</sup> In our present discussion, we will accordingly mostly refer to ‘modernism’, except where critics referred to make prominent use of other terms. This choice will also facilitate the efforts undertaken in this chapter to investigate how Russian ‘postmodernism’ can be related to Russian modernism in a way that parallels to our comparison of Western modernism and postmodernism in Chapter 1. We will now proceed with presenting key characteristics of Russian modernism that concern our overall line of argument, such as its interconnected metaphysical, stylistic and semantic dimensions.

### 3.1 Spiritual Seeking

Russian modernism shared many key aspects with Western modernism, such as the aesthetic manifestation of the desire to come to terms with the society

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garde’ was applied posthumously by Western scholars, implying socio-political radicalism of the movements subsumed under this term. Ioffe refers to the Russian avant-garde as a ‘diverse composite of rather intrinsically idiosyncratic and antagonistic groups, each with its own programmatic, aesthetic, cultural, pragmatic, and poetic aims and agendas’, and suggests viewing them ‘within one general framework of so-called “Great historical modernism”’ [Dennis Ioffe, ‘Modernism in the Context of Russian “Life-Creation”’, *New Zealand Slavonic Journal*, 40 (2006), 22–55 (pp. 23–24)].

<sup>5</sup>Keys, ‘Symbolism and After’, pp. 359–367.

<sup>6</sup>Keys, ‘Symbolism and After’, p. 361.

and the philosophical anthropology of the period of late modernity. Russian modernism aimed to escape the fragmentation of traditional society and of urban, bourgeois existence and, instead, to refashion the world.<sup>7</sup> It was characterised in particular by intense philosophical and metaphysical seeking, which will become much clearer as this chapter progresses. John Bowlt writes that,

[p]erhaps even more so than the Western Symbolists, the poets, painters, and philosophers of the Russian Silver Age made every effort to escape the present by looking back to an Arcadian landscape of pristine myth and fable or forward to a utopian synthesis of art, religion, and organic life. Symbolism was far more than a mere aesthetic tendency; rather, it represented an entire world view and a way of life which engendered intense dreams, religious explorations, decorative rhetoric, and various kinds of metaphysical activity.<sup>8</sup>

Hence, what characterised the creativity of Russian modernism more than anything else was that art and literature were expressions of fundamentally religious, or at least spiritual, pursuits,<sup>9</sup> often with the effect of submitting aesthetic principles to the needs of transmitting transcendent truth. Sarab'ianov highlights the overcoming of reality as the chief demand of Symbolist aesthetics, together with the artist's stretching out towards a meta-

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<sup>7</sup>Marks, pp. 176–274.

<sup>8</sup>John E. Bowlt, *Moscow & St. Petersburg 1900–1920: Art, Life & Culture of the Russian Silver Age* (New York: Vendome, 2008), p. 67.

<sup>9</sup>Reinhard Lauer, *Kleine Geschichte der russischen Literatur* (Munich: Beck, 2005), pp. 144–145, 158–164; Billington, *Russia in Search of Itself*, pp. 53–59.

physical world and higher reality.<sup>10</sup>

Let us briefly remind ourselves in this context of the essential similarity between the Russian iconographic tradition and elements of ‘modernist’ abstract and Soviet political art which we noted in the preceding chapter. A similar relationship between an iconographic approach to art and modernism has been advanced by Steven Cassedy, who has suggested that Andrei Belyi’s understanding of art was close to that embodied in the Orthodox icon. The point of the icon is its status as representing transcendent content rather than its being the result of artistic mastery. It is valued not primarily on aesthetic grounds, but because it is regarded as an embodiment of divine reality.<sup>11</sup> Such an observation confirms our suggestion concerning the modernist writer’s sacerdotal self-perception: he saw himself as offering value and knowledge beyond, and by means of, his artistic craft, thereby relegating the latter to an instrument for the expression of transcendent truth. In his essay ‘On the Reasons for the Decline and New Movements in Contemporary Russian Literature’ (‘O prichinakh upadka i o novykh techeniiakh sovremennoi russkoi literatury’) of 1893, the leading Symbolist Dmitrii Merezhkovskii used the famous analogy of an alabaster amphora to illustrate what he perceived as being the purpose of literature, and of Symbolism in particular: enabling true existence and transcendent reality to shine through the thin walls of the lamp. Consequently, Symbolism was also marked by a new conception of language, which was not seen any longer as being purely a means to communicate, but which suddenly acquired a suggestive transcendent and magical

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<sup>10</sup>D. V. Sarab'ianov, ‘Simvolizm v avangarde: nekotorye aspekty problemy’, in: Georgii F. Kovalenko, *Simvolizm v avangarde* (Moscow: Nauka, 2003), pp. 3–9 (p. 6).

<sup>11</sup>Steven Cassedy, ‘Bely’s Theory of Symbolism as a Formal Iconics of Meaning’, in: *Andrey Bely: Spirit of Symbolism*, ed. by John E. Malmstad (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1987), pp. 285–312 (pp. 303–306).

nature, meant to proclaim and communicate a spiritual reality, which was perceived as being more real than the visible, material reality.<sup>12</sup> Viacheslav Ivanov's slogan '*a realibus ad realiora*' ('from the real to the more real'),<sup>13</sup> distills this notion: while the tangible reality of this world is undeniable in its existence, there exists something beyond it, which may be even more significant. Hence, Russian modernists saw themselves very much as 'seers' and 'prophets'.

Ruth Coates refers to two 'faces' of the religious renaissance of the period: one that desired to reverse the modern shift from theism to humanism, often embodied in the philosophical works of 'academics' (Berdiaev, Bulgakov, Florenskii, Frank and Vernadskii, for example), and a second that pursued non-traditional and esoteric forms of spirituality like the occult, gnosticism and anthroposophy, which often marked the works of 'creative writers' and poets such as Belyi, Blok and Remizov.<sup>14</sup> Importantly, Coates's understanding may be expanded through including a third 'face' which shared with modernist philosophy and literature its major defining aspects: the absurd as manifest in the works by the *Oberiu* and, above all, Daniil Kharmis, a topic to be discussed further below. The shared ground of such philosophical stances among these three 'faces' of Russian modernism are to be found in the writers' awareness of having lost the ability to perceive meaning in human existence, and their consequent loss of faith in the adequacy of traditional and accepted forms of realistic representation. Modernism's formal experimentation and novelty of expression bespoke a very high philosophical

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<sup>12</sup>Lauer, pp. 158–159.

<sup>13</sup>Viacheslav Ivanov, *Freedom and the Tragic Life: A Study in Dostoevsky*, ed. by S. Konovalov, trans. by Norman Cameron (London: Harvill, 1952), p. 49.

<sup>14</sup>Ruth Coates, 'Religious renaissance in the Silver Age', in: *A History of Russian Thought*, pp. 169–193.

insecurity about man's existence in the modern world. In this regard Russian modernism can indeed be approached as

a kind of aesthetic heroism, which in the face of the chaos of the modern world (very much a 'fallen' world) sees art as the only dependable reality and as an ordering principle of a quasi-religious kind. The unity of art is supposedly a salvation from the shattered order of modern reality.<sup>15</sup>

Such a modernist conception of art as a redemptive activity and of the artist as a hero whom such activity enables to transcend mankind's sense of disintegration and alienation is, essentially, a continuation and development of the romanticist longing for unity and of the romanticist concept of the poet as a priest and prophet. For example, Akhmatova's series of poems entitled 'Secrets of the Trade' ('Tainy remesla', 1936–1959)<sup>16</sup> refers to the tormented poet as experiencing the proximity of nature and of muse. In these verses, creativity is portrayed as being inspired by 'Divine babbling' ('Bozhestvennyi lepet'), by listening to the sounds of forest and field, as well as to the mumbling ('chto-to bormochet') coming from empty mirrors, from a world beyond as it were (pp. 278–279). Similarly, Blok, in his poem 'Muse Dressed as Spring Knocked at the Poet's...' ('Muza v ubore vesny postuchalas' k poetu...', 1898)<sup>17</sup> and elsewhere, demonstrates the poet's reliance on divine inspiration. Some critics have compared the modernists'

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<sup>15</sup>Astradur Eysteinnsson, *The Concept of Modernism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 9.

<sup>16</sup>Anna Akhmatova, *Sochineniia v dvukh tomakh. Tom pervyi*, ed. by Mikhail M. Kralin (Moscow: Tsitadel', 1996), pp. 277–281.

<sup>17</sup>Aleksandr Blok, *Sobranie sochinenii v vos'mi tomakh. Tom pervyi: stikhotvoreniia 1897–1904*, ed. by V. N. Orlov, A. A. Surkov and K. I. Chukovskii (Moscow and Leningrad: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1960), p. 377.

awareness of their humanistic and cultural responsibility to that of a ‘secular priesthood’; even though they would not necessarily have agreed, the way in which they viewed their creative activities was ultimately rooted both in the traditional socially responsible role of Russian literature as well as being to varying degrees influenced by the Christian tradition.<sup>18</sup>

Iurii Lotman has argued that Pushkin’s concept of the poet envisaged the latter as someone who lives out practically what he preaches aesthetically, for whom his life is no less important than his art. Consequently, the public self-fashioning of the poet’s biography was almost as worthy of effort as his creative work, resulting ideally in the saint-like life of a zealot. Lotman writes that

in post-Petrine Russian culture, the poet occupied the place that the preceding historical epoch had allotted to the saint, the preacher, the zealot and the martyr. This association was based on faith in the special power of the word and its intimate link with truth (*istina*). Like a saint, so also had the writer to prove his right to speak on behalf of Higher Truth through his devotion.<sup>19</sup>

Such a notion of the artist and poet also defined the position of Symbolist men and women of letters, finding its expression in the concept of *zhiznetvorchestvo* (‘creation of life’), the creation of life through art, which aimed at discovering the alchemist’s stone, the mythical healing Golden Fleece or Novalis’s blue flower, a higher reality, in other words, involving unity with the

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<sup>18</sup>Fjodor Sologub, *Der kleine Dämon*, trans. and ed. by Eckhard Thiele (Leipzig: Reclam, 1980), pp. 299–308 (p. 303).

<sup>19</sup>Iurii M. Lotman, ‘Literaturnaia biografiia v istoriko-kul’turnom kontekste (K tipologicheskomu sootnosheniiu teksta i lichnosti avtora)’, in Iu. M. Lotman, *Izbrannye stat’i v trekh tomakh. Tom I. Stat’i po semiotike i tipologii kul’tury* (Tallin: Aleksandra, 1992), (pp. 365–376), p. 374 (own translation).



infinite, through a Symbolist synthesis of life and the various branches of art.<sup>20</sup>

The tendency to prefer the irrational and dreamlike to the realistic is a further aspect of Russian modernism that resumed the romanticist notion of art. In a way similar to romanticism and its criticism of the utilitarianism and rationalism of modernity,<sup>21</sup> Russian modernism attempted to ‘re-sacralise’ and ‘enchant’ reality, too. To this it added criticism of the technological progress of its time, as well as giving expression to the experience of plain reality being bereft of meaning. According to Novalis, in order to regain meaning and religious substance, an ‘eternal glow’ was required, i.e. an epistemology that accounted for the intuitive, irrational and transcendent.<sup>22</sup>

Our reference to romanticism and its parallels with modernism evokes the observation that there were also major differences between romanticism and modernism, however. Modernists did not share any longer romanticist faith in the unity and power of nature, nor did modernist fiction re-create the sublime, defiant heroism of protagonists like Onegin or Pechorin. On the contrary, the characters in Russian modernist fiction are often at the mercy

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<sup>20</sup>Wolfgang S. Kissel, ‘Habitusmodell und Kunstmanifest: Zur russischen Übersetzung von Jules Amédée Barbey d’Aurevillys “Du dandysme et de George Brummell”’, in: *Russische Moderne Interkulturell: Von der Blauen Blume zum Schwarzen Quadrat*, ed. by Barbara Aufschnaiter and Dunja Brötz (Innsbruck: StudienVerlag 2004), 30–53 (p. 34); Ioffe, p. 39; Roger Keys, *The Reluctant Modernist: Andrei Belyi and the Development of Russian Fiction 1902–1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), pp. 162–163. For a comprehensive discussion of the modernist notion of *zhiznetvorchestvo*, see *Creating Life: The Aesthetic Utopia of Russian Modernism*, ed. by Irina Paperno and Joan Delaney Grossman (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994).

<sup>21</sup>Cf. Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*.

<sup>22</sup>Rainer Goldt, ‘Romantische Kunstreligion im vorrevolutionären Russland: “Wiederverzauberung der Welt” in Literatur, Kunst und Philosophie’, in *Russische Moderne Interkulturell*, pp. 101–117 (pp. 104–105).

of all-encompassing external fragmentation and internal despondency. By and large, the concepts of nature and man implicit in modernism seem to have lost the autonomous freedom that was to the fore in romanticism. This is well exemplified in Zamiatin's *We* by D-503's reference to himself as being like a machine ('Я — как машина [...]').<sup>23</sup>

However, as will become evident in due course, Russian modernism was, not unlike romanticism, concerned with the restoration of deeper meaning to human existence beyond the rational, which also explains why realistic aesthetics were considered inadequate by the modernists: realism was perceived as offering no possibility for accounting for the subjective and irrational in human experience. The notion of theurgy, the magical procuring of a positive intervention of the spiritual in the human world, popular with Symbolists, in particular Belyi and Viacheslav Ivanov, may be regarded as an expression of that very yearning for eternal substance.

## 3.2 Style

Andrei Belyi is known for the experimental character of his œuvre, the innumerable lexical neologisms he produced,<sup>24</sup> and the volume and general variety of his works across various genres. Belyi also seems to have conceived of himself not simply as a writer or man of letters, but also as a '*iurodivyi*, anarchist,

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<sup>23</sup>Evgenii Zamiatin, *Мы*, in *Sovetskaia proza 20–30-kh godov XX veka. Tom 2*, ed. by Mikhail Latyshev (Moscow: TERRA-Knizhnyi klub, 2000), pp. 5–136 (p. 81) (24th Entry).

<sup>24</sup>The nature of Belyi's linguistic innovation and phonetic focus has been discussed in great detail by Anton Hönig, *Andrej Belyjs Romane: Stil und Gestalt* (Munich: Fink, 1965), and Lily Hindly, *Die Neologismen Andrej Belyjs* (Munich: Fink, 1966).

decadent, fool'.<sup>25</sup> His novel *The Silver Dove* is distinguished by its style and language, which give it a powerful subjectivist and mystical hue:<sup>26</sup> ordinarily inanimate matter, such as nature, for example the weather, become active, live participants in the narration, either by advancing the plot themselves, by indirectly 'commenting' on it or directly affecting the characters, who do not appear to be fully in charge of their actions. An example is the opening description of the village Tselebeevo:

Белая дорога, пыльная дорога; бежит она, бежит; сухая усмешка в ней; [...] Врезалась она сухой усмешкой в большой зеленый целебеевский луг. Всякий люд гонит мимо неведомая сила — возы, телеги, подводы, нагруженные деревянными ящиками [...]<sup>27</sup>

A further example of descriptions of locations and of nature, which form a substantial part of the narrative, is taken from the chapter 'Irretrievable Time' ('Nevozvratnoe vremia'):

Вился, и веял над селом, и отрадно целовал кустики, травку, обувь чистый вечер летними слезинками, когда дневное, не голубое вовсе и не серое небо затвердело синевой в то время, когда запад разъял свою пасть и туда утекал дневной пламень и дым; оттуда бросил воздух красные свои,

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<sup>25</sup> Andrej Belyj: *Symbolismus, Anthroposophie, Ein Weg. Texte—Bilder—Daten*, ed. by Taja Gut (Dornach: Steiner, 1997), pp. 9, 14, 17.

<sup>26</sup> In this discussion of Belyi's works, the word 'mystical' is used to denote enigmatic or obscure issues or narrative situations which require a 'theurgical' interpretation in order to be made sense of, i.e. an understanding of the active agency of the spiritual world.

<sup>27</sup> Andrei Belyi, *Sobranie sochinenii. Tom 1. Serebrianyi golub': povest' v semi glavakh. Rasskazy raznykh let*, ed. by Mikhail Latyshev (Moskva: TERRA-Knizhnyi klub, 2003), p. 8.

будто ковровые, платы зари и покрыл ими косяки и бревна изб, ангелочки резные, кусточки, унизал крест колокольный огромной цены рубинами, а жестяной петушок, казалось, был вырезан в вечере задорным, малиновым крылом [...] (p. 36).

The scene is one of a narrator being overwhelmed by the dynamic forces of nature, which presumably are controlled by some kind of cosmic force. Without even any plot or human interaction occurring in this passage, the way in which language is used to describe nature impresses on the reader that something truly mystical and beyond rational comprehension is going on in the novel. Belyi's style of linguistically ascribing uncontainable life and will-power to inanimate objects and nature and thereby turning them into subjects and characters important for the narrative, creates atmosphere and gives his diegeses a mystical and dream-like touch. Belyi himself called this 'vigorous, over-satiated language' ('iadrenyi, perenasyshchennyi iazyk').<sup>28</sup>

Furthermore, the weather and atmosphere of *The Silver Dove* in a broader sense, are often presented as unbearably heavy, hot, sultry, damp, laden and stormy, conducive to day-dreaming, sleep, unconscious and semi-conscious states, while also causing the expectation of a significant event about to occur, which links with instances of day-dreaming and the conscious and unconscious 'metaphysical' experiences of the characters.

Similar points can be made concerning Belyi's second novel *Petersburg* (*Peterburg*),<sup>29</sup> in which the weather and consequently the general atmosphere are mostly marked by storms and oppressive darkness; one of the most used words in the novel is *ten'* (shadow) which offers itself as metaphor for the

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<sup>28</sup>Hindley, p. 21.

<sup>29</sup>Andrei Belyi, *Peterburg* (Petrograd, 1916), Rarity Reprints no. 1; see also the scholarly edition and comments by L. K. Dolgoplov, *Andrei Belyi: Peterburg. Roman v vos'mi glavakh s prologom i epilogom* (Moscow: Nauka, 1981).

novel itself. A shadow is somewhere in between light and darkness, day and night, and in a Platonic sense represents original truth which cannot be fully recovered any longer. As far as the depiction of the main characters, Apollon Apollonovich Ableukhov and his son Nikolai, is concerned, *Petersburg* vacillates on the frontier of reality and mysticism and fantasy and between a mentally 'normal' or conscious state and perception of reality, on the one hand, and more dominant subconscious, mentally traumatised, half-sleeping or hallucinatory states and experiences, on the other.

The active, animate and sometimes supernatural attributes of nature in *The Silver Dove* and of objects in *Petersburg* (the statue of Peter the Great, a caryatid, Petersburg itself), and the emphasis on semi-conscious states underline the mystical nature of these novels. Possibly, the 'shadowy' character of the latter novel is created by a confluence of the natural and the supernatural worlds.<sup>30</sup> The confrontation between the mimetically reproducible world of Petersburg of 1905, the experience of which was shared by a great number of people, and a fantastic and metaphysical world, linked with the characters' non-realistic experiences, which are profoundly subjective in nature, is an example both of ontological instability and epistemological inquiry. This subject will be addressed further below.

Before doing so, however, it should be added that the character of Belyi's language and style being reflective and supportive of his works' overall atmosphere and plot, is typical of modernist writers. Zamiatin's scientific leitmotifs and his volatile and compressed syntax, for example, directly mirror 'the urgent anxiety of modern life' which 'demands brevity, compression,

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<sup>30</sup>For an analysis of the world of shadows as third dimension in the four-dimensional narrative world of *Petersburg*, see Lubomír Doležel, 'The Visible and the Invisible Petersburg', *Russian Literature*, 7 (1979), 465–490. Doležel identifies the visible and the invisible as constituting the novel's first two dimensions, and the supernatural as its fourth dimension.

innovative syntax and imagery, and a literary vocabulary enhanced by provincialisms, neologisms, and scientific and technical terms.’<sup>31</sup> While there is no space for discussing this relationship between style and sensibility in other modernist works, the significance of this interrelationship between style and content seems to be widely recognised,<sup>32</sup> and will be turned to again in due course.

### 3.3 Perspective

*Petersburg* oscillates between the real and the unreal, in the shadow area. This is partly achieved through the obvious violation of natural boundaries, such as that between animacy and inanimacy and by transworld-characters (see below). The uncertainty of the novel’s world, however, is endemic and present at all levels. Robert Maguire and John Malmstad argue that

there are no private thoughts or private actions; all are reflexes of larger realities, which in turn are experienced by all the characters. Even something as concrete as a tic or a gesture may be shared by a number of otherwise seemingly different personages.<sup>33</sup>

This fact speaks of two interconnected things: a lack of delineation of individual consciousness, and implicit anthroposophy. Turning to the first point,

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<sup>31</sup>Robert Russell, ‘The Modernist Tradition’, *The Cambridge Companion to the Classic Russian Novel*, ed. by Malcolm V. Jones and Robin Feuer Miller (Cambridge, New York and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 210–229 (p. 217).

<sup>32</sup>See, for example, Robert Russell’s essay, ‘The Modernist Tradition’, and the individual discussions in Neil Cornwell’s *Reference Guide*.

<sup>33</sup>Andrei Belyi, *Petersburg*, introd. and notes by Maguire and Malmstad (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), p. xii.

the novel displays an implosion of the natural ontological boundaries between different fictional characters. In *Petersburg*, there do not seem to be perfectly self-contained individuals and personalities, they are, like the city itself, all expandable, and seem to share experiences and partake in the overall experience of the novel's world. To use the metaphor again, they are a kind of shadow or sea-haar, without clearly demarcated boundaries, even though they have individually recognisable, mostly physical, characteristics; 'they participate [...] in the workings of a larger reality that exists independent of them'.<sup>34</sup> The fact that the individual characters are open to influence from spiritual beings speaks of a transgression of traditional, realistic ontological boundaries. Secondly, a certain epistemological outlook may be implicit here, which has to do with Belyi's fascination with the anthroposophy of Rudolf Steiner, according to which 'each human being contains a subconscious cosmic memory, that is, a complete knowledge of the history of the universe, which by special training can be brought to consciousness'.<sup>35</sup> From a natural or realistic point of view it is hardly explicable that without conscious coordination a number of people would act similarly; however, if it is assumed that they have access to some kind of shared subconsciousness and access to the spirit world, it would make much more sense. And indeed, the belief in the openness of individuals to spiritual beings adds a clear ontological emphasis to the anthroposophic quest for comprehensive understanding. On the other hand, according to Maguire and Malmstad, these characters fail to understand

that the whole world, natural and man-made, visible and invisible, is a living entity, composed of parts which interconnect

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<sup>34</sup>Maguire and Malmstad, p. xv.

<sup>35</sup>Gerald J. Janecek, 'Kotik Letaev', *Reference Guide*, pp. 161–162 (p. 161).

and thereby acquire their true meaning. To isolate one or more of these parts, physically or intellectually, is to diminish and damage the whole [...]<sup>36</sup>

The heroes try to oppose their world's inherent instability and delude themselves by defining their world according to geometrical forms and functions, and by holding on to specific physical and tangible objects;<sup>37</sup> '[b]ut the narrator treats all such attempts with irony; they represent no more than a partial and provisional reality, and therefore serve only to perpetuate self-deception.'<sup>38</sup> According to Maguire and Malmstad, it is modern fragmentation that Belyi rejects.

The element of uncertainty may be further exemplified in the lack of any clear narrative perspective or hierarchy of viewpoints; even the narrator seems to be overwhelmed by the invasion of the same mental forces that 'created' the characters. While the narrator relates to the characters with irony and ambiguity, his own authority is questioned also, even if not necessarily fully discredited, since he himself appears to be subject to 'cerebral play';<sup>39</sup> Keys writes that '[t]he narrator's word is no more the final court of appeal in this novel than that of any of its protagonists [...]'.<sup>40</sup>

A similar, though less accentuated, uncertainty is caused by conflicting or ambiguous viewpoints, as found in *The Silver Dove*, where the narrative is marked by the co-existence of literary and *skaz* narration, positioned as vehicles for varying viewpoints and different degrees of knowledge. This semantic hierarchy is supplemented by a number of other stylistic devices, such as

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<sup>36</sup>Maguire and Malmstad, pp. xv–xvi.

<sup>37</sup>Maguire and Malmstad, p. xv.

<sup>38</sup>Maguire and Malmstad, p. xv.

<sup>39</sup>Maguire and Malmstad, p. xv; Keys, *The Reluctant Modernist*, p. 230.

<sup>40</sup>Keys, *The Reluctant Modernist*, p. 230.



leitmotifs and a language aimed at highlighting uncertainty and states which resemble that of dreams or shadows and thereby purposely avoid indirect or implicit conclusions about the nature of ‘reality’. Examples are the use of certain conjunctions like *kak budto*, which can express or imply a seeming variance with reality.<sup>41</sup> Such devices seem to underline epistemological and ontological precariousness: reality or unreality can scarcely be differentiated. Consequently, both also escape perception, comprehension and accurate, realistic representation. However, despite this ambiguity at different semantic levels, Keys argues that ‘there is a core of authoritative, theurgic meaning still to be found in *The Silver Dove*’.<sup>42</sup> After all, such theurgic invasion of tangible reality by a non- or semi-corporeal, magical ‘reality’, however elusive, is in itself an overarching semantic statement: it questions that which is commonly regarded as reality and the knowledge thereof, and is, therefore, a profoundly ontological and epistemological statement at the same time. In this regard, *The Silver Dove* can be compared to Bulgakov’s *The Master and Margarita*, to which we shall soon turn.

Before doing so, let us suggest that the levels of composition, themes and motifs in Belyi’s works may be ‘higher’ in a technical sense, as ordering principles, whereas style and plot development may be referred to here as ‘lower’ levels, in that they serve to deliver, or execute, the actual narrative. To illustrate this point further let us introduce the mathematical concept of fractal geometry, which defines the replication of geometric structure of occurrences in nature at sometimes infinite levels. Commonly recognisable illustrations of fractal geometry would be the snowflake, frost pattern or cauliflower, where the overall snowflake or flower comprises smaller flakes or

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<sup>41</sup>Keys, *The Reluctant Modernist*, pp. 211–216.

<sup>42</sup>Keys, *The Reluctant Modernist*, p. 220.

florets bearing the same internal similarity, i.e. pattern, shape and form, under changing external circumstances, i.e. scale. The further one goes down into the ‘microscopic’ structure of the macro-form, the more levels of iteration of the same structure one is bound to find. John Briggs writes about the self-similar scaling of fractals that ‘[f]ractals show similar details on many different scales [...] as viewers peer deeper into the fractal image, they notice that the shapes seen at one scale are similar to the shapes seen in the detail at another scale’.<sup>43</sup> The mysterious, ‘theurgic’ dimension in the two novels by Belyi just considered is present both at the ‘lower’ narratological levels of style, plot and character speech and interaction, and at that of the ‘higher’ motivic composition of the overall narrative world, foregrounded as the novels’ principal semantic quest: the form itself is part of the message, as it were.

### 3.4 Ontology vs. Epistemology

It is the fundamental instability of narrative organisation, semantic authority and perspective which supports and determines the thorough epistemological and ontological complexity characteristic of Belyi’s works. If the shadows in Plato’s cave symbolise what is left of the otherwise lost knowledge of the world of origins beyond this world, Belyi, together with Merezhkovskii and others, would doubtless have agreed that their overwhelming desire was the rediscovery and retrieval of that world beyond manifest reality. If so, *ten’* as overarching recurrent leitmotif may indeed be regarded as a fitting metaphor in *Petersburg*. As we have noted, epistemological investigation is a key feature

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<sup>43</sup>John Briggs, *Fractals: The Patterns of Chaos. Discovering a New Aesthetic of Art, Science, and Nature* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1992), pp. 23, 70.

of *Petersburg* and *The Silver Dove*, a feature which it shares with Russian, and indeed with Western modernism in general. While Roger Keys describes Belyi as ‘a man who sought only transcendent certainty from the flux of experience’,<sup>44</sup> it is precisely this experience of instability and insecurity that seems to materialise itself most clearly in the various fictional ‘strategies’ that he adopted.

*Petersburg* contains certain features which are often cited as characteristic of postmodernism, most notably, intertextuality and ontological instability. Prominently, *Petersburg* engages with Pushkin’s poem *The Bronze Horseman*, for the Bronze Horseman is ascribed a central metaphorical and literal role in the novel. Belyi does more than merely take up Pushkin’s motif and ‘contaminate’ it or use it for his own purposes: in *Petersburg*, the Bronze Horseman is a ‘transworld’<sup>45</sup> character in its own right. An inanimate statue in the tangible world, as well as a literary motif in Pushkin’s *Bronze Horseman*, becomes a real, animate character in the fictional world of Belyi’s novel<sup>46</sup> and the city Petersburg itself becomes animate as arguably ‘the main character of the novel, a living entity’.<sup>47</sup>

‘Transworld’ characters are, of course, the hallmark of most realistic historical fiction; Tolstoy’s character Napoleon in his novel *War and Peace* is an example; ‘it is a special case of the universal structure of literary reference whereby an internal (fictional) field of reference and an external (real-world) field overlap and interpenetrate.’<sup>48</sup> The term ‘transworld’ character could possibly be seen as applying to the first part of Pushkin’s poem itself. How-

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<sup>44</sup>Keys, *The Reluctant Modernist*, p. 233.

<sup>45</sup>See our discussion of this in Chapter 1, Section 3.2.

<sup>46</sup>Cf. the section ‘Gost’ of Chapter 6, pp. 348–350.

<sup>47</sup>Maria Pavlovsky, ‘Petersburg’, *Reference Guide to Russian Literature*, pp. 160–161 (p. 160).

<sup>48</sup>McHale, p. 86.

ever, the case of *Petersburg* is different, which leads the novel's reader to realisation of one of the attributes of the novel which make it so strongly non-realistic — its 'scandalous' violation of ontological boundaries. McHale argues that

[t]here is an ontological scandal when a real-world figure is inserted in a fictional situation, where he interacts with purely fictional characters [...] the presence in a fictional world of a character who is transworld-identical with a real-world figure sends shock-waves throughout that world's ontological structure.<sup>49</sup>

How much larger are these shock-waves when it is not a real-world figure, but an inanimate object in the real world that has come to embody the mythology that developed around a historical figure. Such a case of transworld migration requires even more in the way of ontological transformation. What characterises *Petersburg* in this respect is not only migration through the semi-permeable membrane between two literary texts, but at the same time a migration from the real world to text and a transformation from inanimacy to animacy.<sup>50</sup> Such ontological instability is presented by McHale as what differentiates postmodernism from modernism. Can one conclude from

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<sup>49</sup>McHale, p. 85.

<sup>50</sup>Yet another element pertains to historical transformation. McHale suggests that '[e]ntities can change their ontological status in the course of history, in effect migrating from one ontological realm or level to another. For instance, real world entities and happenings can undergo "mythification," moving from the profane realm to the realm of the sacred. Or mythological entities can, with the erosion of the belief-system that sustains them, lose their status of *superior* reality, "realer" than the real world, and deteriorate to the status of "mere" fictions. The external cut of the fictional heterocosm, it appears, is not determined only by fictions' relation to the external world and to other fictional texts, but also by its place among the whole range of other "unreal" and "quasi-real" ontologies in a given culture' (McHale, p. 36, emphasis in original).

this that *Petersburg* is a postmodern work? Not necessarily, but one can suggest that even McHale's otherwise extremely useful focus on a shift from epistemological to ontological inquiry in the development from modernism to postmodernism may not be perfectly adoptable and applicable to Russian literature. *Petersburg*, Remizov's *The Mere* (*Prud*) and other works of the period, including a novel as late as Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*, reflect a concern with, and a foregrounding of, both aspects. The reason for this is, I suggest, that the epistemological concern of Russian literature, and especially in modernism, has always been slightly different from that in Western literature, with the former displaying a keener interest in metaphysical, and therefore also ontological dimensions than the latter. With respect to Russian modernism, this means that it can be characterised as pursuing both epistemological and ontological inquiry; this ontological emphasis, however, is ultimately secondary, given that it is the result of the highly transcendent nature of the pursuit of knowledge, which cannot be expressed realistically. This argument will be further expanded as this discussion progresses.

The confusion about reality in *The Master and Margarita* is highlighted even more through reversal of the 'naturally assumed' ontological status of the two narratives in Yershalaim and Moscow. The first narrative about Christ is retold in naturalistic and historical-realistic terms and de-emphasizes the supernatural, even though the logic of the Gospel account on which it is based is marked by certain supernatural features. The second narrative is set in Soviet Moscow, which one would 'naturally' expect to be a place that is rather hostile to the metaphysical. It is precisely Moscow, however, that is subject to unprecedented intervention by the supernatural world.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup>Susanne Fusso, 'The Romantic Tradition', *The Cambridge Companion to the Classic Russian Novel*, pp. 171–189 (p. 173).

A second layer of ontological instability is achieved through the portrayal of intertextual characters, such as the Margarita- and Mephistopheles-figures (cf. Goethe's *Faust*), and fantastic or supernatural ones, Voland's retinue.<sup>52</sup> A third layer of instability and hesitation is achieved by a penetration of one world, the contemporary Moscow of Bezdomnyi and his fellow city-dwellers, by another, the 'fantastic' or supernatural world of Satan and his cohort of magicians. It is what McHale refers to with 'dual ontology' of the normal and everyday, on the one hand, meeting with the paranormal or supernatural, on the other hand.<sup>53</sup> In response to invasion from the world beyond, the Moscow establishment tries to resist diabolic chaos by rationalising and explaining the latter away;<sup>54</sup> here the ontological conflict gives rise to epistemological uncertainty. Implicit in Bulgakov's novel is a rejection of rationality and reason not *per se*, but as epistemological conceptions pretending to explain the totality of experience (which is expressed in the term and worldview of rationalism). Officialdom, no matter how much it tries to apply rational insight, is simply mocked by Satan and company, who belong to the world beyond matter which necessarily escapes rational understanding. Thereby Bulgakov's *The*

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<sup>52</sup>From the purely intra-fictional point of view of the novel's characters-bureaucrats, Voland and his entourage are fantastic, uncanny figures; however, from the extra-fictional perspective of the Judeo-Christian cultural tradition, which informed Bulgakov and in particular this novel, they are fallen angels, hence supernatural beings, represented in biblical and theological texts.

<sup>53</sup>McHale, p. 73. Relative to *Petersburg*, Doležel conceptualised the supernatural world as the 'fourth dimension' which interacts with the dimensions of the visible, the invisible and the shadows (see Doležel, 'The Visible and the Invisible Petersburg', pp. 482–487). With regard to *The Master and Margarita*, an alternative model of nine levels of narrative worlds has been offered by Mark Amusin, "Vash roman Vam eshche prineset surprizy" (O spetsifike fantasticheskogo v "Mastere i Margarite")', *Voprosy literatury*, 2005.3/4, 111–123 (pp. 112–113).

<sup>54</sup>Cf. McHale, p. 78.

*Master and Margarita*, in addition to its elements of social satire, rejects an overreliance on the material and rational and ignorance of the spiritual and irrational, dismissing the impoverished philosophical anthropology and epistemology so characteristic of communism, in particular.

Both *Petersburg* and *The Master and Margarita* are concerned with ontology because of the nature of their epistemological yearning. In fact, ontology would appear to figure as an instrument for highlighting epistemological concern, and, therefore, as subordinate to the latter. Even if there are individual aspects of these two novels which could retrospectively be singled out as postmodern, they do not amount to a convincing case; the novels, firmly affirming the existence of a grand narrative, however idiosyncratic it may appear to the reader, are modernist, rather than postmodernist, at their core. Therefore, Russell rightly states that in Bulgakov's novel, the 'foregrounding of the theme of ultimate justice is reassuring in a way that runs counter to the anxiety and uncertainty of modernity'.<sup>55</sup>

### 3.5 Anti-rationalism

We have suggested that modernism was generally motivated by an understanding that rationalistic and materialistic epistemology is 'the way to kill, that is the way to apply concepts and categories, hollow baskets, to the palpitating, unique, asymmetrical, unclassifiable flesh of living human experience',<sup>56</sup> to bend to our purpose part of Isaiah Berlin's characterization of romanticism. Such anti-rationalistic concern, which was, as discussed in Chapter 2, already an important theme in works by Dostoevsky, became even more central in the writings of Evgenii Zamiatin and Daniil Kharmis.

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<sup>55</sup>Russell, p. 227.

<sup>56</sup>Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*, p. 45.

Let us begin with Zamiatin, who made use of a mathematical metaphor similar to the one Dostoevsky had employed, in order to express doubts about society being purely governed by reason and rationality. This occurs in the latter's novel *We* (*My*) in which he presented the One State's desire to remove everything irrational and uncontrollable from human existence. D-503 is confronted with 'этот проклятый  $\sqrt{-1}$ ' (8th Entry, p. 29) — '... а может быть, это  $[\sqrt{-1}]$  — не что иное, как моя «душа», подобно легендарному скорпиону древних добровольно жалищая себя всем тем, что...' (18th Entry, p. 63). Furthermore, Zamiatin's character has problems in engaging in an emotional relationship with I-330 and experiencing real love. With similar conviction, D-503 first attempts, and subsequently refuses, to express — à la Descartes — mathematically inexpressible emotions and elements of life, like love and death, in terms of mathematical functions: 'Отсюда если через «Л» обозначим любовь, а через «С» смерть, то  $L = f(C)$ , то есть любовь и смерть...' (24th Entry, p. 82).

In Zamiatin's *We*, features surface that could be interpreted as being clearly modernist: D-503 is challenged in his worldview by the Mephi rebels, living just outside the walls of the One State in some kind of Stone Age existence, but free and fearless. One of his confrontations with them takes place in an underground area where he sees the word 'Mephi' written on the wall. The 'underground' could be interpreted as a metaphor for the subconscious, while the rebels' nature as 'savages' leaves room for seeing them as examples of pre-modern man challenging the kind of 'supra-modern' civilisation seemingly embodied in the One State.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup>The motif of a confrontation between civilisation and the 'savage' side of humanity is a modernist staple; it was also used in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. In the latter two, it is culture which suppresses savagery (Childs, p. 48); in Zamiatin's *We*, it is the savages who



Like Zamiatin, and perhaps with even greater force, Daniil Kharm's works embody an intense questioning of rationalism, a concern which he, of course, shared with Dostoevsky and other Russian thinkers, and with Russian modernism in general. His writings and philosophy were heavily influenced by Henri Bergson, Aleksandr Tufanov and Malevich, and by the European surrealist and absurdist art movements in general.<sup>58</sup> They shared an aversion to notions of logical connection, determinism and causality, criticising both Kant's belief that it is possible to attain objective knowledge of the world, and modernity in general, with its faith in progress. In Kharm's case such aversion to a logic of progress was heightened by his personal experience of Soviet Marxist ideology.<sup>59</sup> Malevich, asserting the need to create art 'from nothing', advised Kharm to 'stop progress'.<sup>60</sup> Kharm implemented this charge in his story 'Blue Notebook N° 10' ('Golubaia tetrad' N° 10'), where the person at the centre of fictional attention turns out to not exist at all;<sup>61</sup> he thereby 'proclaims the freedom and necessity of both art and the individual to exist independent of the oppressively logical demand that there be "something"'.<sup>62</sup>

Kharm's work, key aspects of which will be discussed in the subsequent section, is characterised by logical, causal, contextual, semantic and etymological chaos or lack of coherence, which give expression to the failure of

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challenge the legitimacy of culture and civilisation, while the latter in its turn suppresses life.

<sup>58</sup>For a discussion of the influence of these thinkers and artists and their philosophies on Kharm, see Hilary L. Fink, *Bergson and Russian Modernism 1900–1930* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1999); Hilary Fink, 'The Kharm'sian Absurd and the Bergsonian Comic: Against Kant and Causality', *The Russian Review*, 57 (1998), 526–538.

<sup>59</sup>Fink, 'The Kharm'sian Absurd and the Bergsonian Comic', pp. 526, 529, 533.

<sup>60</sup>Fink, p. 533.

<sup>61</sup>Fink, pp. 533–534.

<sup>62</sup>Fink, p. 534.

language and communication, to man's alienation from a world that is unfathomable and that possibly does not even exist,<sup>63</sup> and therefore to a concept of art which considers traditional mimesis as being beyond the realm of possibility. As hinted at earlier, this is the case because realistic mimesis requires an objectively verifiable and rationally comprehensible world, whereas Kharms rejected an epistemology that did not account for spiritual and noumenal reality.<sup>64</sup> At the same time, however, Kharms embodied the absurdity of existence with humour, with what one critic has characterised as 'laughter in the void'.<sup>65</sup>

### 3.6 The Absurd and Daniil Kharms

Our earlier discussion of modernist fiction, in particular of *Petersburg* and *The Silver Dove*, as well as the above section on Kharms, have revealed the profound inability of writers to make rational sense of, and attribute rational meaning to, human life. Consequently, their works also reflect the impossibility of representing meaning in a traditional and realistic way. Referring to the Theater of the Absurd, Martin Esslin writes what is true for modernism in general:

it is no longer possible to accept art forms still based on the continuation of standards and concepts that have lost their validity: that is, the possibility of knowing the laws of conduct and ultimate values, as deducible from a firm foundation of revealed

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<sup>63</sup>Fink, pp. 526, 528, 530.

<sup>64</sup>Fink, pp. 533–534.

<sup>65</sup>Alice Stone Nakhimovsky, *Laughter in the Void: An Introduction to the Writings of Daniil Kharms and Alexander Vvedenskii*, Wiener Slawistischer Almanach: Sonderband 5 (Vienna, 1982).

certainty about the purpose of man in the universe.<sup>66</sup>

As the discussion of Belyi's first two novels has shown, analysis of plot and language do not by themselves lead to deduction of semantic intention; hence, the reader is bewildered and his expectations of being offered some kind of sense or meaning through traditional analysis are, at first sight, disappointed. Implied meaning, however, can be ascertained when the 'higher' level of overall fictional construction, composition and motifs is given analytical consideration. The lack of the possibility of straightforward interpretation of plot and language as well as of various narrative viewpoints in this context of Russian modernism is often, of course, in itself an aesthetic expression of the recognition of either the fragmentation of the world or its unintelligibility to rational approaches. Even more so than the immediate unavailability of meaning being an *expression* of the implied author's perception of nature as being in such a condition, it is, perhaps similar to the way in which music operates, a *suggestion* of the same feeling to us as readers, 'enabling us to *experience* what he [the author] cannot make us *understand*'.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup>Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 3rd edn (Harmondsworth, New York and Victoria: Penguin, 1980), pp. 399–400.

<sup>67</sup>Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, trans. by F. L. Pogson (London: Allen; New York: Macmillan, 1913), pp. 11–18 (p. 18) (emphases added). Cf. also Plato's understanding of 'imitation' as opposed to 'pure narration' (i.e. fictional and theoretical writing). In his notes on Plato's *The Republic*, Paul Shorey writes that '[a]ll art is essentially imitation for Plato and Aristotle. But imitation means for them not only the portrayal or description of visible and tangible things, but more especially the communication of a mood or feeling, hence the (to a modern) paradox that music is the most imitative of the arts' [Plato, *The Republic*, 2 vols, trans. by Paul Shorey, Loeb Classical Library (London: Heinemann; New York: Putnam, 1930), 1 (Books I–V), p. 224, note c].

The modernist inability to derive certain meaning from life and represent it accordingly, and the resulting confusion experienced by the reader, is also the pivot on which the genre of the absurd turns. The plot and verbal interaction in absurd narratives often make no logical sense and the narratives, therefore, appear senseless, owing to the absence of narrative and semantic logic and contiguity. Nevertheless, they make sense at the ‘poetic’ or ‘suggestive’, the ideational and compositional levels in that they embody the implied author’s experience of meaninglessness and alienation, and his resulting search for purpose. Therefore, the absurd, both as a philosophical stance and as a literary form, is essentially a metaphysical pursuit, similar to what may be found in some Symbolist literature. Not being consumed by questions of how to live the good life and engage with social reality — a stance which its foes denounced as nihilist — the absurd highlights rather the mortality and impotence of humanity, and thereby operates at more abstract, less tangible levels of ethics and morality. Since its core contains a retaliation against the Enlightenment with its reductive theory of knowledge, the absurd strives to point to the limits of human comprehension and epistemology, while concomitantly and implicitly demanding personal responsibility for his or her actions from the reader.<sup>68</sup>

Let us now discuss both the philosophical and literary manifestations of the absurd,<sup>69</sup> giving special consideration to the Russian literary tradition

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<sup>68</sup>Bertram Müller, *Absurde Literatur in Rußland: Entstehung und Entwicklung* (Munich: Sagner, 1978), pp. 180–183.

<sup>69</sup>The absurd is both an experience-based sensation of meaninglessness, which, if reflected on, can become a philosophy; and a specific literary technique that received renewed impetus during the modernist period and developed into a kind of genre in its own right. Furthermore, literary fiction can reflect a philosophy of the absurd, without it being absurd in the technical sense. At the same time, certain stylistic techniques of the absurd may be appropriated in a literary work without it being truly absurd either

and Daniil Kharms. This will not only enable us now to better understand Russian modernism, but also later to conceptualise segments of post-Soviet literature, in particular certain works by Sorokin and Khurgin, as ‘neo-modernist’.

The word ‘absurd’, which derives from the Latin word *susurrus*<sup>70</sup> (‘whispering’, ‘rustling’<sup>71</sup>), was first used as an aesthetic and musical category meaning ‘out of harmony’, ‘jarring’ or ‘striking a wrong note’.<sup>72</sup> However, its metaphorical usage came early to the foreground, as evidenced, for example, in its employment by the Church Father Tertullian in the second century AD when critically referring to gnosticism as *credo quia absurdum*. This notion of the absence of reason and sense in something is what became the core both of the generally accepted colloquial meaning of the absurd today, i.e. an act or situation that makes no sense to the one calling it absurd, and of its philosophical application. The philosophical absurd describes contradictions with the generally accepted *a priori* and empirical rules of logic; these are,

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(Müller, pp. 29–39); for a fuller discussion of the absurd including its antecedents and its comparative modern evolution, see Neil Cornwell, *The Absurd in Literature* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2006).

<sup>70</sup>Müller, p. 12. *Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary*, however, identifies the term ‘absurd’ as coming from the Latin word *surdus*, which can be rendered among others as ‘deaf’, ‘inaudible’, ‘harsh’, ‘not to the purpose’ [*Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary*, revised edition with supplement, ed. by A. M. Macdonald (Edinburgh: Chambers, 1977), p. 6] and Peter Berger locates its etymological origins in the Latin word *absurdum*, which he translates with ‘out of deafness’ and as perhaps implying ‘deaf to reason’ [Peter L. Berger, *Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience* (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1997), p. 176].

<sup>71</sup>*Oxford Latin Dictionary*, ed. by A. Souter, J.M. Wyllie, C.O. Brind *et al.*, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968–82), II, p. 1893.

<sup>72</sup>Esslin, p. 23; Müller, p. 12.

therefore, beyond the explanatory power of reason and of cause and effect.<sup>73</sup>

A major theoretician of the absurd was Albert Camus, who, however, used discursive logic to express his theory. He called absurd mankind's experience of a world which makes no sense. Having lost faith in any kind of transcendence, man inquires about the meaning of his existence. As such, Camus thought of the absurd as the supreme task of philosophy.<sup>74</sup>

Another thinker, Søren Kierkegaard, viewed the nature of the absurd as being contrary to that of reason, and as being identical with that of faith. He argued, for example, that Abraham's act of sacrificing his own son Isaac was absurd, since it went against reason. Human logic would have required of Abraham to not kill Isaac in order to keep his offspring alive. However, the absurdity (i.e. illogicality) of the situation lies in the fact that Abraham's faithful obedience, through its enabling of divine intervention, secured Isaac's life, rather than ending it.<sup>75</sup>

The absurd could possibly be defined as follows: something becomes absurd when the normal logic of cause and effect and the possibility of their manipulation through pre-meditated and purposeful rational action are no longer given. Furthermore, the consequence of the futility of reason and logic in an absurd situation (given that rational lessons gained from observing cause and effect are one of man's major means of survival, progress and success) can lead to a more permeating sense of the futility of life, of senselessness and desperation. This experience of the absurdity of life was expressed in the Book of Ecclesiastes, which was the cry of desperation of its writer Qohelet (or Ecclesiastes), both words denoting 'Preacher' and tra-

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<sup>73</sup>Müller, pp. 12–13, 39.

<sup>74</sup>Müller, pp. 13–15.

<sup>75</sup>Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and The Sickness unto Death*, trans. by Walter Lowrie (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1954), p. 67.

ditionally identified with King Solomon). Qohelet no longer understood the world when he came to realise that the inherited concepts of cause and effect (such as, that one follows God's Law and receives blessing, or that one is cursed in a contrary situation) did not correspond to the world which he experienced, since he saw many wicked and godless people succeeding, on the one hand, and devout people failing, on the other. Qohelet concluded that meditating on life and trying to influence it are a waste of time, since life itself is beyond control, senseless and absurd. His famous metaphor is, therefore, that everything is 'chasing after the wind'. Nevertheless, at the end of the book, Qohelet affirms the reality of God and of ultimate justice, unlike Camus many centuries after him.

Similar to Qohelet, whose work expressed typologically a philosophy of the absurd, Dostoevsky's *œuvre* also points to an experience of the absurd *avant la lettre*. Camus himself wrote that 'probably no one so much as Dostoevsky has managed to give the absurd world such familiar and tormenting charms'.<sup>76</sup> *The Brothers Karamazov* contains a speech through which Ivan explains to Alesha his struggle to make sense of the contradictions within the empirical, rationally describable Euclidean world, as well as between this Euclidean and the co-existent non-Euclidean and metaphysical world.<sup>77</sup> Crucially, Ivan, and with him the implied author, decide to reject the truth claim of empirical reason in favour of a basically Christian worldview. Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*, which we have considered above, is similarly critical of the adequacy of rational approaches to human existence, and equally reassuring in its bold proclamation of metaphysical truth, which appears to

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<sup>76</sup>Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. by Justin O'Brien (London: Hamilton, 1955), p. 89.

<sup>77</sup>Dostoevskii, *Sobranie sochinenii. Tom deviatyi: Brat'ia Karamazovy*, pp. 294–296 [Book 5, Chapter III ('Brat'ia znakomiatsia')]; Müller, pp. 17–19.

be done without hesitation or ironic qualification. Camus, however, does not afford himself such luxury, since he recognises no transcendent reality or grand narrative that would mitigate the absurd experience.<sup>78</sup> Like Dostoevsky's, Gogol's works also express an element of philosophical absurdity; Bodo Zelinsky, for example, regards *Revizor*, like most of Gogol's *œuvre*, as containing the roots of the absurd in the sense of being permeated by a sense of alienation in an uncanny world, and of a loss of transcendence and hope.<sup>79</sup>

An analysis of the work of Daniil Kharms will allow us to deduce the elements that define the literary genre of the absurd. Let us begin with his miniature narration 'The Incidents' ('Sluchai') from his story cycle of the same name.<sup>80</sup> Everyone in this story either dies, goes insane, or experiences bad luck in other ways. The sketch, whose plot is literally 'incidental' (*sluchaino*), begins with the sentence: 'Однажды Орлов объелся толчёным горохом и умер.' Given the brevity of the story, which is almost shorter than what we have just written about it, the reader might conclude that whatever information it contains is given for the purpose of enlightenment; why would someone waste words on irrelevant information, after all, if he has decided to limit himself to so short a form? Thus, the reader might expect that there would be a causal relationship between the fact that Orlov has eaten too much mashed peas and his death; the two items of information are juxtaposed. However, upon closer consideration, we realise that to die of an overdose of peas would be a truly extraordinary death, almost beyond the

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<sup>78</sup>Cf. Müller, p. 19.

<sup>79</sup>Bodo Zelinsky, *Russische Romantik* (Cologne and Vienna: Böhlau, 1975), pp. 316–317; cf. Claire Whitehead, *The Fantastic in France and Russia in the Nineteenth Century: In Pursuit of Hesitation* (London: Legenda, 2006), pp. 142–143.

<sup>80</sup>*Antologiya satiry i iumora Rossii XX veka: Daniil Kharms*, ed. by Iurii Kushak (Moscow: Eksmo, 2006) p. 128.



realm of conceivable reality. A temporary digestive irritation might be the consequence, but death? Surely, the perceived relationship between Orlov's diet and his death is *absurd*: as an explanation proposed to the reader, it fails to illuminate the situation at all. The laws of logic and of cause and effect are themselves revealed as being irrational and useless.<sup>81</sup>

The narrative continues, however, with the information that 'Крылов, узнав об этом, тоже умер. А Спиридонов умер сам собой. А жена Спиридонова упала с буфета и тоже умерла. А дети Спиридонова утонули в пруду.' This is a whole domino or snow-ball sequence of death and bad luck taking hold of a number of people, for no apparent reason. There is again an implicit suggestion concerning possible causation, but it is not convincing: Krylov, 'узнав об этом'. Did the fact of having learned of Orlov's death cause him to suffer a heart attack? We do not know. However, we can conclude that what Kharms meant to foreground is precisely this absurdity, that is inexplicability, of the sequence of deaths, given that the bad luck experienced by the remaining 'characters', who, like Orlov, are more like mechanical puppets devoid of autonomy, just happens out of the blue even without even the implicit suggestion of false causation. The story ends with the words: 'Хорошие люди не умеют поставить себя на твёрдую ногу', which again is a statement in dire need of elucidation. Why does this concern explicitly good people? This sort of illogical, absurd but comical argumentation is a defining feature of Aleksandr Khurgin's fiction and to a lesser extent also of Vladimir Sorokin's and Vladimir Tuckov's, as will become clearer in the chapters dealing with their works. All three

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<sup>81</sup>Fink, pp. 528–529; Müller, pp. 56–59; Wiebke Reyer, *Eine Analyse Daniil Charms' Kunst der absurden Prosaminiatur anhand ausgewählter Beispiele aus dem Zyklus "Slučai"* (Munich: Grin, 1999).

post-Soviet writers share with Kharms, again to different degrees, not only his puppet-like characters, but also what Alice Nakhimovsky described as the presentation of ‘spectacles without explanation’,<sup>82</sup> i.e. plotlines that are void of any immediately recognisable purpose. Of course, there also are important differences between the short prose of Kharms and that of Sorokin, Tuchkov and Khurgin: the former’s brevity and succinctness is unmatched by the latter, whose works contain richer plotlines and greater narrative depth, however.

Another important level of absurdity in Kharms’s story concerns its autobiographical background. ‘The Incidents’ was written in 1936, at a time when the Stalinist Great Terror was underway. People were being shot or sent to prison or labour camp for no apparent or genuine reason, and a spirit of fear permeated the whole of society. On the grand political level, of course, causality was at work, namely Stalin’s fear of growing opposition within the communist movement. However, at the level of ordinary citizens there was no causal relationship between the actions of individuals and the violence of the state, something that made the suffering and deaths of millions of people absurd, in the most literal sense of the word as connoting something illogical, meaningless and unfathomable. In this sense, ‘The Incidents’ may well be seen as a metaphor or parable of the ‘spirit of its time’.<sup>83</sup>

More importantly, the story reveals that the absurd is fundamentally a matter of lack of a higher perspective: while the Great Terror is senseless at the level of an individual’s life, it can be logically explained at the macro-structural level of historical discourse. Similarly, the above reference to Kierkegaard’s discussion of the absurdity of faith highlighted that some-

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<sup>82</sup>Nakhimovsky, p. 169.

<sup>83</sup>Cf. Fink, p. 528; Reyer.

thing that appears unreasonable from Abraham's or the worm's-eye view may be meaningful in the light of God's perspective, or more generally from the viewpoint of a higher reality. As we have seen, Dostoevsky and Bulgakov, despite experiencing the absurd, held on to such a bird's eye perspective. Likewise, many Russian modernist writers and poets who struggled with the rational unintelligibility of the world sought such transcendent perspectives. Kharm's stories, while not expressly offering any higher perspective (apart from affirming the irrational as the determining force in human life), nevertheless testify to an intense metaphysical seeking of such higher reality, thereby confronting the reader with the sphere of religion.<sup>84</sup> Neil Carrick concludes of Kharm's that 'one has no choice but to believe, not in man, but in an utterly transcendent entity. In Kharm's theology, the divorce between human beings and God, which begets the feeling of absurdity, can be bridged only by God'.<sup>85</sup> Furthermore, owing to its alogical nature, his prose contains a powerful humoristic dimension (which will be addressed in Chapter 4), which seems to mitigate his otherwise bleak experience.<sup>86</sup> In this respect, his works may be likened to those of Franz Kafka, whose works have, amongst others, also been interpreted in terms of a religious and mystical quest for meaning amidst absurdity,<sup>87</sup> in terms of irony and comedy,<sup>88</sup> and as contain-

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<sup>84</sup>Cf. Esslin, p. 402.

<sup>85</sup>Neil Carrick, *Daniil Kharm's: Theologian of the Absurd* (Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 1998), p. 81.

<sup>86</sup>A number of works by Kharm's's *Oberiu* associates, like Aleksandr Vvedenskii, who was much influenced by the Symbolists Khlebnikov and Blok, are characterised by absurd poetics similar to that of Kharm's (Müller, pp. 40-41, 95).

<sup>87</sup>S. Velikovskii, 'Mifologiia absurda', *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 72 (18 June 1960), p. 5; Müller, p. 170.

<sup>88</sup>Walter H. Sokel, *Franz Kafka: Tragik und Ironie. Zur Struktur seiner Kunst* (Munich and Vienna: Langen Müller, 1964), pp. 391-531.

ing an implicit, but profoundly joyful and life-affirming dimension.<sup>89</sup> Camus viewed the tragic condition in Kafka's work as one of firm and aggressive hope, arguing that through his acceptance of the absurd, Kafka fulfilled the precondition for escaping from that very condition.<sup>90</sup> Crucially, Kafka, like Kharms a decade or two later, was able to describe the 'essence [of a soulless, over-mechanized, over-organized world that led to the concentration camps and the bureaucratic tyrannies of totalitarianism] more accurately and more truthfully than any purely naturalistic novel could have done.'<sup>91</sup>

Analysis suggests that as far as metaphysical seeking and the questioning of traditional representation are concerned, Kharms and the *Oberiû* are modernist at core. However, a number of scholars claim, for a variety of reasons, that *Oberiû* poetics are either proto-postmodernist or postmodernist in their own right.<sup>92</sup> Such critics point to the sense of imminent apocalypse in *Oberiû* works,<sup>93</sup> their writers' emphasis on questions relative to the authority and role of the author and the reader, as well as their foregrounding of the ontological relationship between fiction and reality.<sup>94</sup> It could possibly be argued that the fact that Kharms's scepticism regarding the very ability of language to represent *per se* took the modernist rejection of realistic representation

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<sup>89</sup>Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. by Dana Polan, forew. by Réda Bensmaïa (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), pp. 41–42.

<sup>90</sup>Camus, pp. 107–110.

<sup>91</sup>Esslin, p. 317.

<sup>92</sup>Lipovetsky, 'Russian Literary Postmodernism in the 1990s', p. 41; Neil Cornwell, 'Introduction: Daniil Kharms, Black Miniaturist', in *Daniil Kharms and the Poetics of the Absurd: Essays and Materials*, ed. by Neil Cornwell (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1991), pp. 3–21 (pp. 18–19); cf. Roberts, pp. 171–178.

<sup>93</sup>Neil Cornwell, 'Introduction: Daniil Kharms, Black Miniaturist', pp. 18–19; cf. Roberts, pp. 176–177.

<sup>94</sup>See Roberts, pp. 172, 176.

even further: the absurd rejects the ‘analytical means of orderly syntax and conceptual thought’.<sup>95</sup> Absurdity on the formal level as found in the works by Kharms could thereby validate the prefix ‘post’. Be that as it may, the absurd character of form and language in *Oberiu* poetics is of central semantic significance: it pushes the construction (and, for the reader, derivation) of meaning to a ‘higher’ level of composition and motifs, enabling the reader to experience reality from the implied author’s point of view that is being suggested to the reader. Illogicality and lack of immediately recognisable meaning is found at the level of syntax as well as that of plot: the sense of absurdity is iterated in a way that may be compared to the self-similar scaling of fractals. The metaphysical experience of the absurd is thereby communicated neither realistically nor conceptually, but rather through ‘poetic’ truth and by making the reader sense this absurdity himself, something that is, typologically speaking, close to a religious act.<sup>96</sup> To the extent that semantic intention is located above the level of language, plot and perspective and communicated by way of letting the reader participate in the author’s feeling of the world, the absurd is a truly modernist experience and creative discovery, as suggested earlier. The promise of meaning, which Lodge argued to be absent in postmodernism (see subsection 1.3.2),<sup>97</sup> is therefore still prevalent in Kharms’s works. Graham Roberts argues likewise that the ‘*OBERIU* as literary phenomenon is much closer to the modernist period’ than to postmodernism;<sup>98</sup> our own discussion has argued that this is also the case typologically, not merely in terms of literary history.

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<sup>95</sup>Esslin, p. 427.

<sup>96</sup>Esslin, p. 424.

<sup>97</sup>Lodge, p. 12.

<sup>98</sup>Roberts, p. 236, note 14.

### 3.7 Russian Modernism and Beyond

It has been shown that the experience of a world that made no sense any longer could not be reproduced aesthetically through conventional art forms that were ultimately based on the premise of a secure, rational foundation to human existence, epistemology and morality. The metaphysical and moral journey and activity which the modernists, from the Symbolists to Zamiatin, from the *Oberiu* to Bulgakov, undertook in response to such a realisation, engendered the well-known formally and stylistically experimental nature of modernism. The need to place epistemology on a firmer footing by opening it up again to the sacerdotal, magical and spiritual also caused certain literary works of the period to be characterised by a fundamentally ontological challenge: the questioning of the status of visible reality. Some modernists, like Belyi and later Bulgakov, seem to have been to some extent successful in their quest for higher truth. The fact that other writers (like Zamiatin, who rejected the notion of firm truth, and Kharms, who could sense but not identify such higher perspective) seem to have failed in their quest should not deflect analytical attention from the core of what motivated their creativity: the same moral and metaphysical criticism of rationalism, of the notion of progress, and yearning for a true understanding of the world. In all the above cases, it is the irrational and mystical that the implied authors either appear to endorse as an active, supreme force over human affairs,<sup>99</sup> or at least wish to be ceded a more prominent role. Esslin writes that to ‘confront the limits of the human condition is not only equivalent to facing up to the philosophical basis of the scientific attitude, it is also a profound mystical

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<sup>99</sup>Cf. Doležel’s discussion of the sovereignty of the supernatural world over the natural in *Petersburg*, ‘The Visible and the Invisible Petersburg’, pp. 482–487.

experience'<sup>100</sup> in the tradition of Eastern Christian mysticism which emphasised the experience of emptiness and self-emptying (*kenosis*), ineffability and God's otherness and transcendence.<sup>101</sup>

As will become more evident in our later text-based discussions, certain works of post-Soviet literature reveal similar concerns, which is why the term 'neo-modernism' is suggested as a descriptive and analytical concept for encompassing them: Russian modernism's spiritual and sometimes occult striving and its concomitant critique of rationalism are typologically related to aspects of post-Soviet literature, which exhibits, for example, a connatural experience of the absurd.

There are further parallels, however. Soviet communism, based as it was on Marxist philosophy which is grounded in materiality and socio-economic conditions, was an essentially anti-spiritual and anti-religious enterprise, notwithstanding the fact that it acquired strong quasi-religious elements, such as its self-perception as a grand narrative of salvation for humankind and the idolisation of certain Soviet leaders. Arguably, the difficulty of pursuing traditional religion in the Soviet period and the resulting loss of spirituality was exacerbated by the post-Soviet embracing of Western-style capitalism amidst a profound loss of values for the ordinary Soviet and post-Soviet Russian citizen. Amongst other things to be dealt with in later chapters, the search for a higher truth and for morality as evident in post-Soviet fiction, linked with the subjectivist and esoteric nature of various contemporary works, suggests that typological and terminological similarities with Russian modernism and its specific craving for meaning and associated looking backwards to Russia's pre-existing culture to find answers for the present and the

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<sup>100</sup>Esslin, p. 426.

<sup>101</sup>Esslin, pp. 427–8; see also Carrick's book *Daniil Kharms: Theologian of the Absurd* for a fuller discussion of the theological dimension of Kharms's œuvre.

future, may be of greater moment than comparisons with Western postmodernism. Billington suggests that the observable immense general interest of late Soviet and post-Soviet culture in the Russian literary classics from romanticism to realism and, in particular, in the modernist poets and philosophers, as well as in Bakhtin's scholarship of Dostoevsky, is all part and parcel of the Russian public's search for a new identity.<sup>102</sup> If so, this would confirm our own argument of the post-Soviet period consciously and often (though not exclusively) positively re-appraising the Russian cultural heritage, with a focus on modernism. Perhaps this is truly an example of Russians feeding themselves again on the 'best milk from their own mother Russia', as the well-known 'Silver Age' publicist Mikhail Men'shikov (1859–1918) expressed it.<sup>103</sup>

A further reason for giving preference to the prefix 'neo' over that of 'post' relative to the Russian literary evolution in the wake of modernism, is that of the imposition of socialist realism in 1934. Being ideologically charged with the 'portrayal of true and historically concrete reality in its revolutionary development',<sup>104</sup> socialist realism constituted a fundamental reversion to pre-modernist mimesis and an epistemology that was grounded in a partic-

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<sup>102</sup>Billington, *Russia in Search of Itself*, pp. 57–59, 154–155; cf. Jutta Scherrer, 'Ideologie, Identität und Erinnerung: Eine neue Russische Idee für Rußland?', *Osteuropa*, 54 (2004.8), 27–41.

<sup>103</sup>Quoted by Iurii Sokhriakov, 'Rabota sovesti (Natsional'naia ideia v publitsistike M. O. Men'shikova)', in *Natsional'naia ideia v otechestvennoi publitsistike XIX–nachala XX vv.* (Moscow: Nasledie, 2000), pp. 170–186 (p. 181). Men'shikov believed that the pursuit of the good and of Russia's cultural and spiritual renewal required a combination of the best traditions of Russia and the West.

<sup>104</sup>Andrei Siniavskii-Terts, 'Chto takoe sotsialisticheskii realizm', in: Siniavskii-Terts, *Fantasticheskii mir Abrama Terts'a*, ed. and introd. by Boris Filippov (New York: Inter-Language Literary Associates, 1967), pp. 399–446 (p. 402) (own translation).



ular notion of materially and socially attainable truth: in Andrei Zhdanov's words, *sotsrealizm* was to 'stand with both feet firmly planted on a materialist basis'.<sup>105</sup> Certainly, the reality to be portrayed was not fully in existence at the time, which accounts for Zhdanov's assimilation of Gor'ky's prior concept of the new art amounting to 'revolutionary romanticism'.<sup>106</sup> Furthermore, this future reality was flexible enough to be what the Party wanted it to be. Notwithstanding this, the structural principle behind socialist realism was the faith in the possibility and necessity of its aesthetic representation of reality. Epstein's theory of socialist realism as being typologically postmodern because of the illusory and simulative nature of its contents,<sup>107</sup> can therefore be further questioned: unlike modernism and postmodernism, socialist realism relied on mimesis and realistic representation.

Now, it is arguable that in the 1960s socialist realism began to lose authority as aesthetic paradigm, enabling non-conformist writers and artists to turn back to Russia's modernist heritage for inspiration and resume its experimental character.<sup>108</sup> Such conscious drawing on modernism in the 1960s after the *Thaw* prompted Epstein to speak of a 'second wave of modernism'<sup>109</sup> with its various futurist and abstractionist trends in literature and art, embodied by Andrei Voznesenskii and Vasilii Aksenov. According to Epstein, such 'neomodernism' drew nostalgically on the historical period

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<sup>105</sup> Andrei Zhdanov, 'Soviet Literature — the Richest in Ideas. The Most Advanced Literature', in *Soviet Writers' Congress 1934. The Debate on Socialist Realism and Modernism in the Soviet Union: Maxim Gorky, Karl Radek, Nikolai Bukharin, Andrey Zdanov and others*, ed. by H. G. Scott (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1977), pp. 15–24 (p. 21).

<sup>106</sup> Zhdanov, pp. 21–22.

<sup>107</sup> Epstein, *After the Future*, pp. 205–210.

<sup>108</sup> Müller, pp. 95–168.

<sup>109</sup> Epstein, *After the Future*, p. 207.

of modernism.<sup>110</sup> Such a descriptive term makes sense, considering that Russia's historical modernism ceased with socialist realism. Similarly, the engagement with modernism by writers of the post-Stalin period was rather one that affirmed the experimental dimension of modernist poetics while not quasi-programmatically rejecting its metaphysical seeking; as discussed in Chapter 1, this is an important aspect that the term 'postmodernism' is viewed as implying.

In fact, it is questionable whether postmodernism could have developed naturally from modernism as is generally asserted of the relationship between Western modernism and postmodernism, if only because of the artificial interruption of *sotsrealizm*. Epstein, however, for reasons discussed in earlier chapters, proposes the typological concept of postmodernism not only for Russian culture in general, but also specifically for segments of Russian literature since the 1970s and 1980s. This literary postmodernism is what Epstein terms conceptualism (more on this phenomenon in the next chapter), and which he views as having an antimodernist, and hence postmodernist, character, and as sharing this with socialist realism.<sup>111</sup> At this point, our own research would tend to disagree with Epstein's model again. Instead, it is argued here that specific segments of post-Soviet literature are typologically related to, and inspired by, Russian modernism, as adumbrated above. Having said this, the works of post-Soviet fiction to be studied here surely also differ from historical modernism by virtue of their critical engagement with the Soviet and the post-Soviet period.

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<sup>110</sup>Epstein, *After the Future*, p. 207.

<sup>111</sup>Epstein, pp. 207–210.

## Chapter 4

# Perspectives on Humour and ‘Postmodernism’ in Post-Soviet Russian Fiction

*For the very creation of good it is necessary to take only the best, only the perfect,  
that can be found around us in the inexhaustible material of civilisation, for  
example in our classics, absorbing only the best milk from our own mother Russia  
and the best air from the West.*<sup>1</sup>

— Mikhail Men'shikov (1859–1918)

In the preceding three chapters, we have discussed the concept of post-modernism as a response to both modernity and modernism, and outlined hesitations as to its typological and literary-historical suitability in the Russian context, giving preference to the term ‘neo-modernism’. The present chapter functions as a bridge between such deductive, general considerations and the inductive, text-based discussions that follow. Our discussion here focuses on features which are commonly identified as ‘markers’ of postmod-

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<sup>1</sup>Quoted by Sokhriakov, p. 181 (own translation).

ern playfulness, such as intertextuality, pastiche, metafiction, parody and carnivalism, to name but the most commonly applied.<sup>2</sup> With some variations, such ‘postmodern’ elements abound in the works of fiction analysed in later chapters. We will examine such features with regard to their semantic purpose in the literary works to be examined later; they are, therefore, arranged here according to the structural role which they perform in the works to be discussed, and are presented under two rubrics, those of humour and the foregrounding of literary creativity. Ultimately, both these appear to be informed by the concerns of *Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung* and *Gegenwartsbewältigung* (i.e. a coming to terms with the past and the present), thereby containing a ‘therapeutic’ dimension (for writer and reader), on the one hand, and by a notion that could be dubbed ‘the redemptive power of literature’, on the other. Arguably, such individually ‘therapeutic’ and culturally ‘redemptive’ concerns provide important underlying motivations for what so often appear to be meaningless and bizarre postmodern texts. Let us begin with the first set of philosophical, thematic and literary rubrics, that of *Aufarbeitung und Bewältigung*, ‘therapy’ and relief: humour, carnival, *iurodstvo*, and conceptualism.

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<sup>2</sup>e.g. Ol'ga Bogdanova, *Postmodernizm v kontekste sovremennoi russkoi literatury (60–90-e gody XX veka – nachalo XXI veka)* (St Petersburg: Filfak SPbGU, 2004), pp. 6–7; Epstein, *After the Future*, pp. 202–203; Ihab Hassan, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature*, 2nd edn (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), pp. 267–271; Viacheslav Kuritsyn, *Russkii literaturnyi Postmodernizm* (Moscow: OGI, 2000), pp. 177–229; Richard Sheppard, *Modernism — Dada — Postmodernism* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2000), p. 356; *Sovremennaia russkaia proza (1990-e gg.–nachalo XXI v.)*, ed. by S. I. Timina (Moscow and St Petersburg: Academia, 2005), pp. 101–104; Perry Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity* (London and New York: Verso, 1998), pp. 60–61; cf. Groys, *Die Erfindung Russlands*, p. 195.

## 4.1 *Aufarbeitung, Bewältigung* and Relief

*Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung* is a complex of public moral, political, juridical and cultural processes that encompass a nation's attempts to come to terms with its past. It presupposes a traumatic period of history that placed a great deal of responsibility and guilt on the society in question. It is inherently difficult to establish how a nation as a whole is able to incur guilt for committing horrendous crimes, and how she may learn from, as well as atone for them. This is because a modern nation or society is a highly complex entity, consisting of actors at multiple levels of moral, political and legal responsibility. True *Aufarbeitung* goes beyond the legal establishment of who was responsible for which individual crime by asking questions about how a wider nation-wide and corporate complicity in such crimes was possible, analysing the various aspects of history which gave rise to a culture of political crime. Such processes need be at least partly willed by government, owing to the control which it exercises over research and teaching from secondary to higher education, and are facilitated by free media and a civil society that at large desires to deal with its past rather than cover up and actively forget or even glorify its history.

In the Russian case, non-conformist literature throughout the Soviet period, from Zamiatin to Solzhenitsyn, has dealt critically with dangerous political and social trends, so that even in the absence of civil society, there has been a continuation of the classic role of the writer in terms of assuming moral responsibility. As it appears, the authorities in post-Soviet Russia have been reluctant to fully embrace and sponsor a systematic process of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, fearing ultimately that the notion of Russia's greatness as a nation might be tarnished, something that might have added to the general instability that a new Russian Federation in search of an identity had

been faced with.<sup>3</sup> However, a number of post-Soviet literary works reveal a powerful concern with Russian history in general and with the Soviet period in particular, such as Sorokin's novel *The Blue Fat* (*Goluboe salo*), which we will study in detail in the next chapter. A related concept is that of *Gegenwartsbewältigung*, coming to terms with the present, which, in the context of post-Soviet Russian literature, refers to the immense, and for many perhaps traumatic, historic change which Russia experienced in terms of ideology, national identity, society, and the individual's place in it. Various post-Soviet writers appear to harness the power of humour and satire both to critically respond to the post-Soviet world and to enable their Russian readers to come to terms with it.

#### 4.1.1 Humour

Humour and the comic, and various related sub-categories like carnival, parody and satire, some of which will be analysed further below, play a central role in post-Soviet fiction. We will, therefore, outline the main way in which humour and the comic assist the reader to comprehend the moral outlook which the use of these categories implies and reveals in literary texts and, hence, enable the reader to recognise meaning in texts which at first glance evade understanding. It will be suggested that the type of humour that is evident in the works studied in this dissertation is best approached as a mixture of elements described by various aspects of relief, superiority and incongruity theories of humour.<sup>4</sup> Whereas relief or release theory focusses on

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<sup>3</sup>Cf. Stefan Rohdewald, 'Post-Soviet Remembrance of the Holocaust and National Memories of the Second World War in Russia, Ukraine and Lithuania', *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 44 (2008), 173–184 (p. 175).

<sup>4</sup>See Paul E. McGhee, *Humour: Its Origin and Development* (San Francisco: Freeman, 1979), for a discussion of the manifold characteristics of humour; cf. Seth Graham, *Res-*

humour's function of granting relief to a reader or joke-teller from an oppressive or otherwise exacting situation,<sup>5</sup> superiority theory tends to emphasise the temporary inversion of a power relationship which humour can facilitate; both theories have the effects of humour as their objects of analysis. Incongruity theory, however, points to a method of constructing or composing humour and comedy, namely by way of surprise, i.e. through an unexpected violation of what the reader or listener anticipates in terms of plot development, on the one hand, and through juxtaposition of what are often actions or speeches that are ordinarily incongruent with each other, on the other hand. The way in which post-Soviet humour, as evident from the works to be studied in the following three chapters, may be approached as a 'cocktail' of these three major facets of humour, will become clearer as the discussion develops.

To facilitate the analysis that follows, it might be helpful to provide a précis of certain key ideas of Henri Bergson<sup>6</sup> and Karlheinz Stierle,<sup>7</sup> since these will give significant insight into the object of study. Henri Bergson cites absent-mindedness, human inertia and a certain inelasticity reminiscent of mechanical movement as amongst the main sources of humour. One example given by Bergson is that of a man who absent-mindedly continues his programme of physical movement based on his intention to sit down on a chair without realising that the chair has been removed. The by-stander's reaction is one of laughter, even though the man in question is embarrassed

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*onant Dissonance: The Russian Joke in Cultural Context* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2009), p. 15.

<sup>5</sup>See Berger, *Redeeming Laughter*, pp. 45–64, 99–133, for discussions of the releasing nature of humour.

<sup>6</sup>Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (Rockville, MD: Arc Manor, 2008).

<sup>7</sup>Karlheinz Stierle, *Text als Handlung* (Munich: Fink, 1975), pp. 56–97.

and has possibly hurt himself. Bergson points out that a certain emotional dissociation is necessary for the sensation of humour to arise. If the same by-stander felt sympathy for the man falling on his bottom, or did not for the moment suppress these feelings, then he would be unable to laugh.<sup>8</sup> One's response to such a situation is, therefore, dependent on one's perspective, a feature which we will come across again in our later textual studies. The kind of humour that is based on the peculiarities and flaws of human character appears of particular importance for works studied in the present work, works which present typified characters with a peculiar physiognomy or personality, who differ from the social norm and appear mechanical by comparison with the social environment. Often, the comic character seems to be under the rule of some alien influence. This heteronomy,<sup>9</sup> of which the character is unaware, causes the latter to fail in his or her enterprises. This turns the original subject-object relationship on its head, as proposed by Stierle.<sup>10</sup>

An important element of humour of character, which also bears on our understanding of the absurd and illuminates aspects of Tuchkov's and Khurgin's fiction, is automatism and rigidity combined with unsociability and absent-mindedness: '[w]e laugh every time a person gives us the impression of being a thing'.<sup>11</sup> This Bergson illustrates with Jack-in-the-box, a little toy man held on a coil spring in a box. The toy jumps out of the box whenever it is opened. In Bergson's analysis, such a Jack-in-the-box embodies the fight between two contrary movements and purposes, a mechanical one and a second one which originates with a living being, i.e. the human playing with

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<sup>8</sup>Bergson, pp. 10–14, 71, 87.

<sup>9</sup>In moral philosophy, 'heteronomy' means 'subjection to the rule of another being or power (e.g. of the will to the passions); subjection to external law. Opp. to autonomy' (*OED*).

<sup>10</sup>Stierle, pp. 56–97.

<sup>11</sup>Bergson, p. 33.



the Jack-in-the-box. The first (mechanical) movement usually surrenders to the second (live) one, while the originator of the second movement (the child playing with the toy) normally experiences amusement. Another example which Bergson uses to illustrate this aspect of humour is that of a cat catching a mouse and playing with it. Bergson also cites scenes from Molière's plays in support of his theory that a repeated mechanical action opposed by a stronger living force is a key element of situational humour as well as the dancing-Jack figure, a character who appears to be in control of his life and who is going through the corresponding motions, but who, in actual fact, is a toy in someone else's hands (pp. 38–42, 68–72). In his view, 'any arrangement of acts and events is comic which gives us, in a single combination, the illusion of life and the distinct impression of a mechanical arrangement' (p. 38) creates comic characters; it is an example of incongruity.

In Bergson's view, laughter is a kind of unconscious device for social correction, inherent in human society: '[l]aughter punishes certain failings somewhat as disease punishes certain forms of excess, striking down some who are innocent and sparing some who are guilty, aiming at a general result and incapable of dealing separately with each individual case. [...] Its function is to intimidate by humiliating' (p. 93), whereby it ultimately serves to enforce what society regards as the norm (of behaviour or appearance, for example). At first glance, such views would appear to place the moral dimension of the comic at the level of social coherence rather than at that of universally valid norms. Apart from the fact that a functioning society is a distinct value,<sup>12</sup> too, let us consider that times of sweeping and revolutionary

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<sup>12</sup>The mimicry of internalised social cohesion, however, may also be seen as the opposite, namely as a form of protest against an oppressive society [Carl Hill, *The Soul of Wit: Joke Theory from Grimm to Freud* (Lincoln, NE, and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), pp. 197–198].

change often provide individuals with insufficient time to adapt themselves to the new situation. Depending on an individual's psychology, age, moral outlook, material and intellectual possibilities, some people are less able or willing than others to respond successfully to changing circumstances, that may require a different set of criteria to ensure social inclusion than had formerly been the case. Incongruity here means the humorous rendering of the dilemma of individuals who do not fit into the new time and cannot let go of their old ways of life, as we also see in some of Anton Chekhov's plays (for example, *Cherry Orchard* (*Vishnevyyi sad*) or *Uncle Vania* (*Diadia Vania*), Zoshchenko's works, Olesha's *Envy* (*Zavist'*) and Bulgakov's *Heart of a Dog* (*Sobach'e serdtse*) (although, of course, in the latter it is not the 'old', but the 'new man', who is parodied). As we will see in our analysis of works by Tuchkov and Khurgin, their humour is a case of the implied author's concern for those who are either unable to cope with their lives during a time of change, or indeed comic and grotesque representation of those who go beyond universal moral-cum-social norms.

A point similar to that of Bergson concerning mechanical subjects has been formulated by Karlheinz Stierle, who argues that situational comedy is created through static, or rather heteronomous characters. An example would be Charlie Chaplin in the film *Modern Times*, who so much internalises the movements of his hands at the conveyor-belt that he continues this repeated motion even when he leaves his work-place. The conveyor-belt or industrial motion which he has become used to determines his action; Charlie as subject has become an object. His mechanical motions are not comic as long as he works, because they are in line with the rhythm and direction of movement which the situation requires; however, as an example of incongruity, exaggeration and heteronomy, they become comic the moment

he leaves his work-place, for the new situation ordinarily necessitates different motions and thereby causes the original and compulsive movements to appear afunctional.<sup>13</sup>

Heteronomy can appear in different ways, such as for example a servant who acts like a lord, or vice versa, a lord who does not live up to society's expectations of this role: the respective characters suffer from cultural heteronomy, that is they are directed by other social or cultural roles. Certain comic elements in Gogol's fiction are examples of heteronomy, in particular in combination with his use of metonymy: in *The Nose*, for example, the subject's (Kovalev's) bodily unity is destroyed and a part of it (him) begins to dominate the rest of the subject and turns itself into a kind of meta-subject directing the thoughts and actions of the subject, who is now more reminiscent of an object.<sup>14</sup>

Heteronomy of this kind may be related to certain fictional works of Khurgin and Tuchkov, in which the characters are completely consumed by certain passions and fixed ideas, which therefore direct their actions. Because these mental dispositions, be they absent-mindedness or real psychoses, become meta-subjects within the subjects or characters themselves, the courses of action which they follow are perceived as comic, notwithstanding the fact that such actions are often horrific in their consequences.

Such heteronomy, can, in fact, be related to the absurd. According to Bergson, there is a close connection between absurdity and humour, which can be found in the peculiar logic of a comic character or in something that is 'absurd from one point of view though capable of a natural explanation from another.'<sup>15</sup> This would, for example, hold true for a number of characters

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<sup>13</sup>Stierle, pp. 58–60.

<sup>14</sup>Stierle, pp. 56–73.

<sup>15</sup>Bergson, pp. 67–68 (p. 86.)

in Tuchkov's and Khurgin's stories as much as in Kharms's works: their behaviour, the plot in general, is perfectly logical from the point of view of their way of thinking, but not at all from the reader's perspective.

The particular kind of absurdity that can inhere in a comic character 'does not create the comic; rather, we might say that the comic infuses into it its own particular essence. It is not a cause, but an effect, an effect of a very special kind [...]'<sup>16</sup> What Bergson refers to as

a very special inversion of common sense. It consists in seeking to mould things on an idea of one's own, instead of moulding one's ideas on things, — in seeing before us what we are thinking of, instead of thinking of what we see.<sup>17</sup>

Further aspects of 'absurd laughter' are repetitions, highlighting the mechanical or automated nature of a character, as well as the depersonalisation and unsociability that come with it.<sup>18</sup> These are features in the fiction of all three writers this work is concerned with.

Let us now turn our attention again to the therapeutic dimension of humour, already acknowledged as such in antiquity, as seen in Proverbs 17. 22, for example: 'A merry heart doeth good like a medicine; but a broken spirit drieth the bones' (AV). The connection, already mentioned, between times of change and their propensity for irony and comedy in literature has been analysed by Lesley Milne, for example. In her book on the writers Il'f and Petrov and Zoshchenko, she observes with regard to the popularity of the three writers in post-Soviet Russia that times of profound ideological change often give rise to a greater use of humour and irony as a 'safety

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<sup>16</sup>Bergson, p. 86.

<sup>17</sup>Bergson, p. 87.

<sup>18</sup>Fink, pp. 536–537.

valve for the ideological pressure-cooker'.<sup>19</sup> She quotes in particular Evgenii Petrov, who wrote of the 1920s that '[i]nstead of morality, we had irony. It helped us to transcend that post-revolutionary vacuum, when no one knew what was good and what was bad.'<sup>20</sup> Milne argues that this may be the reason 'why the novels of Il'f and Petrov have acquired fresh resonance in every subsequent epoch of intellectual re-evaluation: the Thaw, *perestroika*, and the post-Soviet ideological void, where concepts of good and bad are once more under revision.'<sup>21</sup> It appears that the humorous dimension of post-Soviet literature serves a similar purpose.

Such a view of humour functioning as a relief mechanism in the Soviet and post-Soviet Russian context is also advanced by Christie Davies, who sees laughter as 'paratelic time off, in this [the East European communist] case an agreeable respite from the compulsory and turgid ideological rhetoric of a socialist society'.<sup>22</sup> Humour may release psychological pressure and help people to endure an 'abusive' situation, given that often the teller of a joke and his listener experience feelings of superiority over the person, group, or situation which in real life is superior to them, something that enables them to laugh at whatever in reality causes them to experience discomfort or injustice. The following section will discuss a cultural form of laughter, carnival, which effects a similar temporary inversion of real-life power relationships. Simon Critchley, however, goes further by arguing that the release of tension

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<sup>19</sup>Lesley Milne, *Zoshchenko and the Ilf-Petrov Partnership: How They Laughed* (Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 2003), p. 205, cf. pp. 124–125, 140–141, 265.

<sup>20</sup>Evgenii Petrov, 'Moi drug Il'f', *Zhurnalists*, 1967.6, 60–64 (p. 62), cited in Milne, *How They Laughed*, p. 140.

<sup>21</sup>Milne, *How They Laughed*, pp. 140–141.

<sup>22</sup>Christie Davies, *Jokes and their Relation to Society* (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1998), p. 176; cf. also Susan Purdie, *Comedy: The Mastery of Discourse* (New York, London, Toronto, et al.: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), p. 126.

which humour brings is always aimed at seeking a situation change. Above and beyond its function as psychological pressure-valve, it can be critical towards society<sup>23</sup> and individuals, and elicit positive change.<sup>24</sup> Perhaps more importantly, humour has a philosophical dimension in that it requires a conscious distancing from, and abstract relation to, the world,<sup>25</sup> which also describes the main philosophical and psychological underpinning of Zamiatin's *We*, for example. Such a view correlates with that of Martin Esslin, whose words cited below can also be applied to the social realities of post-Soviet life. Esslin, writing about the theatre of the absurd, proposed that

[t]here are enormous pressures in our world that seek to induce mankind to bear the loss of faith and moral certainties by being drugged into oblivion — by mass entertainment, shallow material satisfactions, pseudo-explanations of reality, and cheap ideologies [...] Today [...] the need to confront man with the reality of his situation is greater than ever. For the dignity of man lies in his ability to face reality in all its senselessness; to accept it freely, without fear, without illusions — and to laugh at it.<sup>26</sup>

#### 4.1.2 Carnivalisation

Carnival as a cultural and religious phenomenon has been studied in a number of works, from Goethe's *Das römische Karneval* of 1788 and Florens Rang's

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<sup>23</sup>For a more comprehensive discussion of the role of humour and in particular jokes in Russia and the Soviet Union, see Graham, *Resonant Dissonance*, and Ben Lewis, *Hammer and Tickle: A History of Communism Told Through Communist Jokes* (London: Phoenix, 2009).

<sup>24</sup>Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 9–12.

<sup>25</sup>Critchley, pp. 61–62.

<sup>26</sup>Esslin, p. 429.

*Historische Psychologie des Karnevals* of 1909 which located its origins in Mesopotamian and Chaldean astro-religion, to James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1922), to name but few. It plays an important role in the work of Rabelais, of course, and the issue of carnival and literary carnivalisation has been treated in great depth in the scholarship of Mikhail Bakhtin. Rang argued that carnival appears to have originated in ancient Mesopotamia, the first civilisation to have developed an all-encompassing worldview that defined the place of humans in relation to the stars, which were revered as gods revealed. Residents of the fertile crescent, the Chaldeans eventually moved from a moon- to a sun-based calendar, which necessitated the insertion of leap-days into the existing calendar. This caused fundamental disruption to the highly esteemed notion of harmony between heaven and earth, given that the greatest of the gods, the sun and the moon, could not be mathematically reconciled. Such leap-days represented the idea of cosmic chaos, folly and lawlessness, an intermission from the otherwise well-ordered universe with its calculable planetary movements and the dominance of duty, reason and law in the Mesopotamian state. 'Carnival' was the result of this absence of authority, an interregnum, since the sun and moon failed to provide astrological guidance during this period. Such days of luminary disinterest in human affairs were resourcefully escaped by drinking, which allowed people to forget this cosmic irrationality, together with their own sorrows, resulting in a celebration of scorn and laughter in which the world was turned upside down. Rang argued that the inebriation and derisive laughter typical of carnival represents an example of man's attempts to flee from the dead order of reason. Since the latter already represents the flight from fear, carnival, therefore, is tantamount to a flight from fearlessness and to an em-

bracing of the fear of death.<sup>27</sup> Carnival, therefore, also represents the revolt of the powerless against the powerful. It does this at different levels: at that of man as species vis-à-vis the cosmos, and at that of a simple peasant or commoner against the powerful in human society. Both ancient Roman and mediaeval carnival manifested itself as a celebration travestying the dominant social and moral order. During the limited period of holidays, the hierarchies of the sacred and the profane, of high and low culture (including that of standard and substandard language), and of the spirit and the body were inversed.<sup>28</sup> Bakhtin conceptualised carnival as part and parcel of the mediaeval culture of parody and laughter which he characterised as being a universal culture of the time which had the function of liberating the people from the seriousness of official and authoritarian culture, and as constituting unofficial, but popular truth.<sup>29</sup> As with Rang's analysis of the origins of carnival, Bakhtin saw the function of mediaeval laughter as one engaging with fear in a fundamental way. However, unlike Rang, who regarded laughter as ultimately embracing and affirming fear, Bakhtin approached laughter as popular means of gaining victory over fear, whatever its objects: the might of God, nature, the mystery of the world, or the sacred and the prohibited. Everything that mediaeval man ordinarily perceived as threatening was presented as ridiculous; the supernaturally dreadful, such as hell and death, were triumphed over by transforming them into their earthly manifestation, the woman's womb, which simultaneously represented both the grave and new birth.<sup>30</sup> The language and forms of expression inherent in this carnival

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<sup>27</sup>Florens C. Rang, *Historische Psychologie des Karnevals* [Berlin: Brinkmann & Bose, 1983 (first published in 1909)], pp. 7–18, 33.

<sup>28</sup>Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. by Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 1965), pp. 93–97.

<sup>29</sup>Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, pp. 83–90.

<sup>30</sup>Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, pp. 21–22, 90–92.



world are often transposed into literature, something which Bakhtin called ‘carnivalisation’.<sup>31</sup> Rabelais’s work was not only the ‘high point’ of mediaeval laughter,<sup>32</sup> but during the Renaissance also an example of the crossing of this popular culture of laughter into high culture; according to Bakhtin, it was a sign of an independent and critical view of history in Rabelais: it unmasked the ruling powers and official truth, and welcomed the return to better times with its promises of justice and abundance.<sup>33</sup>

An important element in Bakhtin’s work on carnival was the argument that the latter, through its negation and rejection of the dominant culture which it temporarily suspends or turns upside down, actually communicates and engages in dialogue with that culture; he pointed out that the liberation which the culture of laughter offered to the mediaeval populace was only partial or utopian, and that, in fact, many authors of parodic texts were devout adherents of the religious culture which they parodied. Moreover, Bakhtin mentions evidence that certain parodies were paradoxically regarded as didactic and edifying in nature, pointing to the fact that to mediaeval man, it was no contradiction to elevate the world turned upside down while serving the real world.<sup>34</sup> The critic Julia Kristeva expresses an associated idea by arguing that carnival is not a real transgression against and negation of the dominant culture and discourse, but rather a pseudo-transgression:

La subversion de la parole carnavalesque transgressive est neutralisée par l’abolition de la Loi: c’est la transgression qui domine le carnaval. Mais il ne s’agit que d’une pseudo-transgression, d’un

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<sup>31</sup>Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, ed. and trans. by Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 122.

<sup>32</sup>Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p. 101.

<sup>33</sup>Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, pp. 96–97.

<sup>34</sup>Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, pp. 94–96.

signifié négatif qui a besoin du spectre constant de son positif, la  
Loi. La parole carnalesque manque ainsi son propos.<sup>35</sup>

Expressing a similar conclusion, Umberto Eco writes that ‘comedy and carnival are not instances of real transgressions: on the contrary, they represent paramount examples of law enforcement.’<sup>36</sup>

Carnivalisation, the utilisation of carnivalistic principles in literature, while often emphatically identified as a postmodern feature, was employed in eighteenth-century Russian novels like Chulkov’s *The Comely Cook*,<sup>37</sup> and later also by the modernist writers Céline and Proust.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, a carnivalistic spirit is sometimes present in Dostoevsky’s works, as in *The Idiot*, and also in Babel’s story ‘Prishchepa’ in *The Red Cavalry*.<sup>39</sup> Bulgakov’s novel *The Master and Margarita* also has a powerful carnivalistic dimension: the world of bureaucracy and materialistic ideology is turned on its head and transformed into a spectacle. However, what seems to define specifically postmodern carnivalisation is the focus on literature as its object of revolt. Brian McHale views postmodernist literature as a ‘carnivalized’ genre. It constitutes ‘official literature’s dialectical antithesis and parodic double’.<sup>40</sup> According to him, postmodernist fiction inherits the main characteristics of carnivalised literature: its heterogeneity and ontological instability, stylistic

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<sup>35</sup>Julia Kristeva, *Le Texte du roman* (The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1970), pp. 164–165.

<sup>36</sup>Umberto Eco, ‘Frames of Comic Freedom’, in Umberto Eco, V. V. Ivanov and Monica Rector, *Carnival!*, ed. by Thomas A. Sebeok (Berlin, New York and Amsterdam: Mouton, 1984), pp. 1–9 (p. 6).

<sup>37</sup>David Gasperetti, ‘The Carnavalesque Spirit of the Eighteenth-Century Russian Novel’, *The Russian Review*, 52 (1993), pp. 166–183.

<sup>38</sup>Zima, p. 25.

<sup>39</sup>David K. Danow, *The Spirit of Carnival: Magical Realism and the Grotesque* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1995), pp. 28–31.

<sup>40</sup>McHale, p. 172.

heteroglossia and incoherent structure. Our textual analyses will show that what McHale argued concerning postmodernist fiction, in terms of its playing a satirical, parodic and antithetical role to that of official literature, is applicable to a degree to post-Soviet Russian fiction, most of all to Sorokin's and Tuchkov's works. At the same time, what looks like a carnivalesque attack on the literary canon ultimately confirms the latter's superiority. In a way that is related to Kristeva's comment above, David Shepherd writes that carnivalistic transgression of hierarchy 'actually confirms and bolsters the security of the more enduring authority which it purports to challenge'.<sup>41</sup> However, as Shepherd points out, such carnivalistic subversion has a liberating effect since it offers a 'glimpse of a better alternative; hence the not uncommon description of Bakhtin as a utopian'.<sup>42</sup> Our text-based studies, particular apropos of Sorokin, will illustrate how post-Soviet fiction can be both humorously critical and ultimately affirmative of Russia's literary tradition, above and beyond its satirical quality relative to the Soviet past and the post-Soviet present.

As noted above, Bakhtin in his study of Rabelais suggested that cheerful mockery of reality lies at the heart of the grotesque parody and carnival that characterised mediaeval society and in particular Rabelais's work. A related argument is made by the German Rabelais-scholar Hausmann, who argues that the comic and grotesque elements in Rabelais's work were a protective mechanism in an enormously changing world. Hausman writes:

The comic and grotesque defamiliarisation in Rabelais is part and parcel of a worldview which does not yet rationally cope with

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<sup>41</sup>David Shepherd, *Beyond Metafiction: Self-Consciousness in Soviet Literature* (Oxford, New York, Toronto *et al.*: Clarendon Press, 1992), pp. 119–120.

<sup>42</sup>Shepherd, *Beyond Metafiction*, p. 120.

superordinate restraints. Therefore, the use of the comic in a time of incisive upheaval appears as a natural defence mechanism.<sup>43</sup>

At first glance, Rabelais's work is thoroughly shocking and tasteless, both in its content and in the language and register it uses. Mediaeval man, however, would arguably have been familiar with such a counter-culture which ultimately affirmed the existing order. Parallel to mediaeval culture, Hausmann views the carnivalistic plot and language of *Gargantua and Pantagruel* as implicitly pointing to, and confirming that which it appears to reject: the contemporary culture which regarded Christianity and morality as the saving anchor for humanity; he calls this artistic device 'comic dialectics', an approach which will concern us again in our later discussions.<sup>44</sup>

#### 4.1.3 Jestings and *Iurodstvo*

'Comic dialectics' in the work of Rabelais are best viewed in conjunction with the notion of the fool or jester. Bakhtin regarded the officially sanctioned culture of jesting as a close relative of carnival in the overall culture of laughter.<sup>45</sup> Hausmann argues that Rabelais was influenced by his teacher, Erasmus of Rotterdam and his work *The Praise of Folly*.<sup>46</sup> The latter presents as foolishness what has been widely accepted as wisdom, and as true wisdom what has been widely treated as folly.<sup>47</sup> Erasmus in his turn adopted the notion

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<sup>43</sup>Franz-Rutger Hausmann, 'Nachwort', in François Rabelais, *Gargantua*, trans. by Wolf Steinsieck (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2003), pp. 237–272 (pp. 263–264) (own translation).

<sup>44</sup>Hausmann, pp. 263–264.

<sup>45</sup>Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, pp. 88–90.

<sup>46</sup>Hausmann, pp. 264–266.

<sup>47</sup>Cf. Walter Kaiser, who describes Erasmus's semantic strategy in terms of a 'new kind of irony', one that self-consciously foregrounds the uncertainty of meaning [*Praisers of Folly: Erasmus, Rabelais, Shakespeare* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), pp. 36–39].

from the Apostle Paul, who preached that faith in Christ and in His sacrifice was true wisdom even though it was regarded by the Jewish and Greek world of his day as foolishness and therefore rejected: in their majority, the Judeans of the time had expected their Messiah to be a conquering king who would liberate them from the Roman yoke, not a suffering servant who would be crucified and forsaken by God; in the same way, the message of Christ's crucifixion as offering salvation seemed literally foolish to the Greeks as a nation of philosophers.<sup>48</sup>

While Russia's holy fools are a distinct concept, their function can be related to that of the jesters at mediaeval Europe's royal courts, who were allowed to subject their lords to criticism through the use of wit and humour, thereby entertaining their sovereign and the people. A jester's possible protection lies in the defence mechanism which is inherent in humour, the fact that a wit can claim to be 'just joking' rather than speaking out the literal truth and facts; a holy fool's protection for otherwise unacceptable actions or words lay in his being seen as a 'fool for Christ's sake'. Holy foolishness was sometimes also a kind of religiously motivated social protest: *iurodivye* were regarded as prophets and were therefore allowed to speak freely.<sup>49</sup> Such holy fools were respected as being almost at the level of saints. While many were recognised as truly insane, others faked their insanity in order to imitate Christ's humility. Clairvoyant and miraculous powers were attributed to them. They were characterised by their determination to follow their spiritual calling, rather than human reason.<sup>50</sup> Richard Taruskin describes holy foolishness as understood in Russia as being 'a state of perfect freedom from

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<sup>48</sup>See I Corinthians 1. 18–25.

<sup>49</sup>D. S. Likhachev and A. M. Panchenko, *'Smekhovoi mir' drevnei Rusi*, Leningrad: Nauka, 1976), p. 139.

<sup>50</sup>Procaccia, pp. 217–218, 223; Berger, pp. 187–196, 215.

cogitation (brains) and charms (beauty), a state of perfect authenticity.<sup>51</sup> It involved the rejection of rationality and other forms of worldliness, and for this reason holy fools were adored, unlike in Western Christianity. Likhachev and Panchenko define holy foolishness in a way similar to that of Taruskin: ‘the life of the holy fool [...] consisted in the conscious denial of beauty [...] more precisely, it consisted in the turning of this ideal of the beautiful upside down and in the elevation of the ugly to a level of the positive.’<sup>52</sup>

Lipovetsky suggests that postmodernist writers, like mediaeval holy fools, enter into dialogue with the world by ‘striving to find the truth in filth and obscenity’.<sup>53</sup> As will be discussed further, there is an element of truth in Lipovetsky’s analysis, and Russia’s ‘postmodern’ writers really seek the truth and the eternal in what appears to be its rebarbative opposite. However, if this really was the case, their works would perhaps better not be called ‘postmodern’ in the proper sense, given that there is no absolute truth to be looked for from a postmodern perspective which privileges relativistic and particularistic categories to the detriment of universal ones (see Chapter 1); *iurodstvo* is a pre-modern way of engaging with the world, after all. If post-Soviet Russian writers, like their realist and modernist antecessors, still look for overarching truth, ‘postmodern’ is perhaps the wrong descriptive word for their works. Even though they may not all exclusively fix their attention on the stars as it were, but often on the dirty ground of reality as well, an aspect relative to which one could argue such poetics being different from modernism, such gazing downward is nevertheless subordinate to the task of ascertaining a higher reality. Despite such a difference between post-Soviet

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<sup>51</sup>Richard Taruskin, *Defining Russia Musically* (Princeton, NJ, and Woodstock: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 71.

<sup>52</sup>Likhachev and Panchenko, p. 103 (own translation).

<sup>53</sup>Lipovetsky, *Dialogue with Chaos*, p. 74, cf. p. 82.

literature and Russian modernism, our later discussions will reveal evidence that tips the balance in favour of approaching segments of post-Soviet fiction as ‘neo-modernist’. This concept is suggested in this work since it has the advantage of emphasising typological continuities and similarities with Russian modernism, a fascination which the late Soviet and post-Soviet periods seems to have excited in contemporary writers and poets. It is arguable that this engagement with the concerns and body of thought and literature of modernism, including its own delving into the repository of pre-existent Russian culture, is more profound than usually implied by references to postmodern play.

#### 4.1.4 Conceptualism and *Sots-art*

A further category that requires our attention is that of conceptualism, since it figures prominently in virtually all discussions of Russian postmodernism, exhibiting a playful, at first sight superficial character. Russian or Moscow conceptualism can be described as a school whose membership numbers, among others, the poets Lev Rubinshtein (born in 1947), Dmitrii Prigov (1940–2007), Timur Kibirov (born in 1955) and Vsevolod Nekrasov (born in 1934). Conceptualists strive to remove the author from the aesthetic and literary process by using the language and style of other writers, or an aesthetic system, such as socialist realism, rather than their own. As a result, the writer or poet remains an outsider to the language and discourse which he uses. Epstein defines Russian conceptualism in the following words:

[a] concept [*kontsept* as a unit of conceptual art] is an idea attached to a reality to which it can never correspond, giving rise, through this intentional incongruity, to alienating, ironic or grotesque effects. Conceptualism plays with perverted ideas that

have been lost or distorted [...] Conceptualism is a poetics of denuded notions and self-sufficient signs that has been deliberately detached from the reality it is supposed to designate.<sup>54</sup>

Russian conceptualism is broadly synonymous with *sots-art*,<sup>55</sup> which combines the designations of *sots-realizm* and ‘pop-art’. The term was coined as early as 1972 by the two Moscow artists Vitalii Komar (born in 1943) and Aleksandr Melamid (born in 1945). *Sots-art* is often regarded as the first original Russian art movement since the avant-garde of the 1920s, and uses Soviet signs and discourse and socialist realist *topoi*, estranging them by means of alienation or irony. It seems to be informed by nostalgia as much as by a spirit of deconstruction, often directed at Soviet socialist and utopian myths.<sup>56</sup> Epstein defines *sots-art* concisely in the following way: it is ‘entirely oriented toward socialist realism and reproduces its models in exaggerated mystical and simultaneously ironic manner’.<sup>57</sup>

According to Andrei Erofeev, *sots-art*

appropriates and subverts propaganda images and slogans to transform them into something that is both playful and grotesque. Through its irreverent use of symbols which, in their original context, were intended as a means of dominating the individual,

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<sup>54</sup>Mikhail Epstein, ‘Theses on Metarealism and Conceptualism’, in Epstein, Genis, and Vladiv-Glover, *New Perspectives*, pp. 105–110 (p. 107).

<sup>55</sup>Lipovetsky, *Dialogue with Chaos*, p. 312.

<sup>56</sup>Cf. Sally Laird, *Voices of Russian Literature: Interviews with Ten Contemporary Writers* (Oxford, New York, Athens et al.: Oxford University Press, 1999) pp. 126, 149; Golubkov, pp. 78–79; Andrei Erofeev and *La maison rouge, SOTS-ART/COII.APT Political Art in Russia from 1972 to today* (exhibition prospectus), in <<http://www.lamaisonrouge.org/PDF/2007/sots-art-pk.pdf>> [accessed on 1 May 2009], p. 5.

<sup>57</sup>Epstein, *After the Future*, pp. 207–208.



Sots Art had a genuinely liberating effect on Soviet minds.<sup>58</sup>

Erofeev argues that unlike Western pop-art which he views as conformist and opportunistic, *sots-art* is a form of political protest; it ‘emphasises the fragility and decline of ideological constructions which aspire to eternal status’.<sup>59</sup> He points out something which would indeed place *sots-art* in the philosophical vicinity of postmodernism, in particular with regard to the ideas expressed by Lyotard and Baudrillard (see Chapter 1):

[t]he philosophical basis for Sots Art is nihilistic relativism. Sots Art rejects all belief in any dogma whatsoever. It is against all forms of worship [...] Sots Art refuses to tolerate systems that humiliate the individual [...] the weapons it uses are laughter, ridicule, travesty and mystification. [...] Sots Art responds not to reality but to its images. It believes there is no reality beyond the message. This is why its only enemy is the repressive message and the media that convey the rhetoric of power.<sup>60</sup>

To illustrate the matter further, we invite the reader to look at the photographs of two exhibits displayed at a *sots-art* exhibition in Paris in 2007–2008.<sup>61</sup> The installation by a *sots-art* artist depicted below (Figure 4.1) shows Hitler and Stalin hitting planet Earth in unison with a hammer, as if the disastrous dictatorships and wars which they embodied had been planned

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<sup>58</sup>Erofeev, ‘About Sots Art: The Style of Mockers’, *SOTS-ART/COI.APT Political Art in Russia from 1972 to today*, p. 5.

<sup>59</sup>Erofeev, ‘About Sots Art: The Style of Mockers’, p. 7.

<sup>60</sup>Erofeev, ‘About Sots Art: The Style of Mockers’, pp. 7–8.

<sup>61</sup>I thank Valtteri Mujunen for allowing me to use these photographs which he took at the *Sots Art, Art Politique en Russie à partir de 1971* exhibition in Paris, La Maison Rouge, October 2007–January 2008.

together in advance and carried through accordingly. History tells a different story, but the installations point to the fact that, even though Hitler and Stalin were enemies, they may well be viewed as related in their totalitarian spirit, as well as in the disastrous consequences of their leadership on the USSR and Germany and, of course, the wider world. A similar idea is expressed in the works of Vladimir Sorokin, in particular his novel *The Blue Fat* (*Goluboe salo*), which shows Hitler and Stalin as ruling the world together (see the chapter on Sorokin).



Figure 4.1: Stalin and Hitler

Another exhibit from the same exhibition, shown in Figure 4.2, presents a reworking of Vera Mukhina's monumental statue *The Worker and Woman Farmer* (*Rabochii i kolkhoznitsa*), but the original figures are replaced by the Disney cartoon characters Mickey and Minnie Mouse. The seriousness and presumptuousness of the work by Mukhina, and with it its underlying socialist realist discursive and aesthetic paradigm, are highlighted and criticised by its juxtaposition with a discourse of cheerful entertainment. Mukhina's statue is mentioned and parodied in Vladimir Tuchkov's story 'Iraida Shtol'ts and her Children' ('Iraida Shtol'ts i ee deti'), and Soviet monumentalism is referred to in a similar vein in Sorokin's *The Blue Fat*.



Figure 4.2: *The Worker and Kolhoz Woman*

These two examples of *sots-art* installations will suffice to show how certain contemporary Russian artists employ *sots-art* strategies: they take symbols, faces and slogans which represent a certain ideological point of view, and then re-arrange them hyperbolically and grotesquely by juxtaposing them with an entirely different, incongruous style or discourse (socialist realist monumentalism with Disney cartoons, for example), thereby provoking a comic reaction in the onlooker. This explains the relationship between *sots-art*, conceptualism and certain aspects of post-Soviet literature later analysed in the present work, as well as the fact that a number of critics, Lipovetsky and Bogdanova among them, are at pains to emphasise that Vladimir Sorokin is first and foremost a ‘conceptualist’ writer.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup>Lipovetsky, *Dialogue with Chaos*, p. 181; O. V. Bogdanova, *Kontseptualist pisatel' i khudozhnik Vladimir Sorokin* (Sankt-Peterburg: Filfak SPbGU, 2005).

Through such creative acts of critically highlighting specific, but universally experienced aspects of Soviet culture, the reader and onlooker as much as the writer and artist are helped to come to terms with the nation's past, including its impact on the individual. The strategies of defamiliarisation employed by *sots-art* may be seen as encompassing a moral purpose; superficial, tactical deconstruction serves a strategic, positive objective,<sup>63</sup> that of *Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung*. Real *Aufarbeitung* has to address the level of ideas and their substance, of ideological indoctrination, which traditionally uses the means of language and aesthetics. It appears that this is precisely what *sots-art*, and with it segments of post-Soviet literature, are concerned to do.

## 4.2 The Redemptive Power of Literature

Having discussed the notions of relief, therapy and constructive criticism as an overarching function of the various categories that describe pivotal elements of post-Soviet fiction, we shall now turn our attention to a second set of categories whose shared, but most abstract, function appears to consist in the recovery of the lost redemptive power of literature, partaking of Russia's 'own milk' in the words of Men'shikov. For the purposes of illustration, we suggest viewing the role explicitly and implicitly played by intertextuality, pastiche, parody and metafiction in works of late Soviet and post-Soviet literature, by analogy with the concept of 'glorious ruins',<sup>64</sup> of immense for-

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<sup>63</sup>Cf. Golubkov, p. 87; Kuritsyn, pp. 94-97.

<sup>64</sup>This 'colloquialism' was coined, in a different context, by the late philosopher and theologian Francis Schaeffer, inspired by Isaiah 61. 4 (personal communication with Richard Krejcir, Schaeffer Institute, November 2010). The imagery of ruins, graves and ashes figures centrally in the works of Jacques Derrida, too, of course. Derrida used such images

mer greatness and achievement, which, however, now lies in ruins. Though nothing in comparison to what Russian culture had arguably been, its contemporary remains are still 'glorious' when viewed against the background of the debris of history beneath which they are buried. Such appears to be the implied authorial view of the Russian literary heritage from the 'Golden' to the 'Silver Age' to be found in certain works of post-Soviet fiction.

Such a narrative world of 'glorious ruins' is well illustrated in Tolstaia's novel *Kys'*,<sup>65</sup> to which we shall briefly turn. This, Tolstaia's first novel and written between 1986 and 2000, tells the story of a young man called Benedikt who lives in Fedor-Kuz'michsk, a world which 200 years earlier had been known as Moscow, before the 'big bang' took place, that is the nuclear disaster which destroyed almost all of the former Russian civilisation. Chronologically, the story is set in the future, but in terms of cultural and technological development, it is set in a mixture of what appears to be the Stone Age and the Middle Ages.

Arguably, the major theme of the novel is Russia's cultural heritage, which has survived the big bang. The novel is full of countless references to and partial borrowings from this cultural legacy, quotations or references to representatives and works of Russian art, history, literature, placed in the mouths or thoughts of the characters. These references range from the Church Slavonic alphabet via the 'Golden' and 'Silver Age' to Soviet literature and mirror the idea of the inextinguishable power of art and literature, which, although humanity may have been thrown back into the Stone Age,

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to express his sense of mourning over the final loss of the possibility of representation, a mourning which, however, may well be seen as entailing the messianic hope of future restoration [Gideon Ofrat, *The Jewish Derrida*, trans. by Peretz Kidron (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2001), pp. 81–91].

<sup>65</sup>Tat'iana Tolstaia, *Kys'* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2010).

still speak to the hearts and minds of people. Most of all, however, it is Pushkin who is quoted and spoken of. Access to whichever books survived the big bang is a great privilege, since printed books from earlier times are forbidden to the general populace; only state-employed scribes, who hand-copy the real books, can get their hands on them. Hence, only a few people, in conspiratorial manner, get to read the real books.

The novel's main character, the scribe Benedikt, is completely consumed by his single passion of reading all available books. However, he is told by the former dissidents Lev L'vovich and Nikita Ivanych that he does not know how to read. They advise him to learn the alphabet, meaning an alphabet symbolic of moral values rather than one of letters. This recommendation makes Benedikt, who is now believed to be one of the most educated men in Fedor-Kuz'michsk, very angry, since he cannot see the difference between literacy in the technical sense and the moral understanding which education aims to engender. Using an analogy with the Church Slavonic alphabet, the dissidents criticise Benedikt in the following dialogue in the slightly alienated Russian that characterises the novel's language:

[...] Да я знаете, сколько книг перечитамши?! Сколько переписамши?

— Да хоть тыщу...

— Больше!

— ...хоть тыщу, все равно. Читать ты, по сути дела, не умеешь, книга тебе не впрок, пустой шелест, набор букв.

Жизненную, жизненную азбуку не освоил! [...]

— Есть и «ферт», а есть и «фита», «ять», «ижица», есть понятия тебе недоступные: чуткость, сострадание, великодушие...

- Права личности, — подъялдыкнул Лев Львович, из диссидентов.
- Честность, справедливость, душевная зоркость...
- Свобода слова, свобода печати, свобода собраний, — Лев Львович.
- Взаимопомощь, уважение к другому человеку... Самопожертвование... (pp. 342–343, 'Iery').

According to the Russian scholar Ol'ga Bogdanova, *Kys'* implicitly embodies the view that contemporary man has lost the ability to read books with understanding, thereby reflecting the fact that literature seems to have lost its moral impact on the reader. Even the huge amount of books which Benedikt has access to are not able to transform his peasant mentality and self-awareness, to help his intellect mature, or to enable him to act in a socially responsible way. The result of his reading books is increased aggression and selfishness, not the discovery of Immanuel Kant's 'inner moral law', which is also referred to in *Kys'*.<sup>66</sup>

This thumbnail sketch of Tolstaia's novel shows the extraordinarily expressive way in which the novel exhibits the notion and imagery of 'ruins of glory' which we introduced earlier: the dilapidated remains or ruins of the literary canon in the post-catastrophe world, though scarcely available physically and hardly understood in its moral dimension, are nevertheless the most glorious source of meaning that man has access to. Though not all post-Soviet fiction expresses such a view of the world in allegorical ways as powerful as those embodied by Tolstaia in this novel and perhaps by Sorokin in *The Blue Fat* and *The Ice*, one of the key concerns of *Kys'* is nevertheless

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<sup>66</sup>Bogdanova, *Postmodernizm v kontekste sovremennoi russkoi literatury (60–90-gody-nachalo XXI veka)*, p. 272.

the Russian literary tradition and its cultural and social centrality for Russia. We propose that the various elements of intertextuality, pastiche, parody and metafiction which abound in post-Soviet fiction are, in fact, comparable to a fictional stroll around these ruins of glory and redemption. Let us therefore view such elements, which we will now discuss in more detail, as aesthetic attempts to recover as much of this glory as possible.

#### 4.2.1 Intertextuality

The model of ‘ruins of glory’ as introduced above finds its equivalent in the conceptualist model of the library or museum. In *Kys'*, the hero spends a period of his life in the library with all the books from the previous age, and this model may help us to appreciate the character of a number of post-Soviet literary works.<sup>67</sup> A library, and even more so a museum, exhibits objects which may not have a function in society any longer; they are an institutional way of preserving the collective memory.<sup>68</sup> A number of post-Soviet writers, Tolstaia, Sorokin and Tuchkov, for example, construct their texts by choosing different items from Russia’s literary and cultural museum, thereby creating a metafictional and intertextual dimension. Among others methods, this includes that of pastiche. While these features are often regarded as markers of postmodern poetics, none of these methods, of course, are postmodern in themselves.

As the biblical book Qohelet (Ecclesiastes) remarks, there is nothing new under the sun: intertextuality, for example, is a defining feature of that collection of ancient writings known as the Bible, in which many texts are linked

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<sup>67</sup>Andrei Bitov’s *Pushkin House* (1971) is perhaps one of the first literary works that thematise the Russian cultural heritage as a museum.

<sup>68</sup>Groys, *Die Erfindung Rußlands*, p. 228.



with others through citations, key words and motifs, allusions, prophecy, and various other theological concepts.<sup>69</sup> Robert Alter writes that '[i]f texts are ubiquitous, intertextuality becomes the essential aspect of existence, or rather communication, for all texts'.<sup>70</sup> To emphasise this point further, if intertextuality were a uniquely postmodern phenomenon, then Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time*, and Joyce's *Ulysses* as a showcase work of modernism, must also be regarded as postmodern works. Similarly, Russian modernism was highly intertextual in its breadth of dialogical engagement with previous cultural epochs, as evidenced, for example, in the Symbolists' recourse to biblical apocalyptic literature. Moreover, modernist poets engaged in intertextual dialogue with each other, as seen, for example, in the dialogicity of Akhmatova's poetry with that of Blok.<sup>71</sup> Kharms's prose is also characterised by a polemic dialogue with the classics, from Dostoevsky and Tolstoy to Chekhov.<sup>72</sup>

Belyi's *Petersburg* has a strong intertextual dimension, too. It has been argued by Paul Waszink that Belyi's style is a 'secondary' one, that is, he adopted someone else's style and entered into a dialogic relationship with it, and primarily with the styles of Nikolai Gogol' and Dostoevsky.<sup>73</sup> An even more important and obvious intertextual and dialogical reference point

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<sup>69</sup>V. Bruce, K. Waltke and Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), pp. 125–142.

<sup>70</sup>Robert Alter, 'Mimesis and the motive for fiction', *Triquarterly*, 42 (1978), 228–249 (p. 233).

<sup>71</sup>Cf. Akhmatova's poem 'Podorozhnik' (1917) and Blok's 'Kogda v listve syroi i rzhavoi' (1907), cited by Brigitte Obermayr, 'Paradoxe Partizipation: Intertextualität und Postmoderne (A. Achmatova und D. A. Prigov)', in *Russische Moderne Interkulturell*, pp. 84–100 (pp. 90–95).

<sup>72</sup>Fink, p. 529.

<sup>73</sup>Paul M. Waszink, '*Such things happen in the World*': *deixis in three short stories by N. V. Gogol*' (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1988), p. 260.

in *Petersburg* is Pushkin, of course. Pushkin's poetry is constantly cited in the chapters' epigraphs, albeit in a distorted form, as well as by the characters themselves, thereby constituting a subtext which permeates the entire novel.<sup>74</sup> In *Petersburg*, intertextuality is present at various levels: at that of style and literary motifs (Gogol', Pushkin and Dostoevsky), at that of the characters' consciousness, as well as more clearly at that of the novel's plot and epigraphs (Pushkin).

A discussion of intertextuality invites a brief discussion of the works of Il'f and Petrov, who in a certain sense appear to have used artistic strategies similar to those which we will find in the works of Tuchkov, Khurgin, Sorokin, and Pelevin and Tolstaia's *Kys'*. The most salient parallels would encompass use of the grotesque and parody, caricature and mimicry of the elite, of literature and of 'sacred' subject matters.

Examples in their works encompass caricatures of Lenin and Marx, of Eisenstein's films *Battleship Potemkin* and *October* and of Lermontov's *Demon*, as well as of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky in the pseudonym F. Tolstoevsky which they adopted for the journal *Krokodil*.<sup>75</sup> A comment made by Benedikt Sarnov<sup>76</sup> and discussed by Milne is of potential relevance for the current study, namely the view of literary parody as 'proof of familiarity with Russian culture rather than a crime against it', with Russian literature not necessarily being thought of as a sacred object.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>74</sup>Fusso, pp. 181–184.

<sup>75</sup>Milne, *How They Laughed*, pp. 156–158, 202.

<sup>76</sup>Benedikt Sarnov, 'Ten', stavshaia predmetom', in *Sovetskaia literaturnaia parodiia*, 2 vols (1988), I, pp. 5–66; Sarnov, 'Chto zhe spriatano v Dvenadtsati stul'iakh?', *Oktiabr'*, 1992.6, 165–182.

<sup>77</sup>Milne, p. 262.

### 4.2.2 Metafiction

Closely linked to intertextuality in postmodern discourse is the concept of metafiction, to which we will now turn. Robert Alter argues that metafiction has always existed as a quantitatively ‘lesser genre’ side by side with the un-selfconscious novel. According to him, all novels, including postmodern ones, are ultimately verisimilar in various imaginative ways, whether they are self-conscious or un-selfconscious and realistic.<sup>78</sup> He defines self-consciousness in fiction as a ‘consistent effort to convey to us a sense of the fictional world as an authorial construct set up against a background of literary tradition and convention’.<sup>79</sup> Alter finds that the proclivity to self-consciousness in fiction has been proportional to a questioning of artistic means and possibilities, prompted by various cultural and intellectual developments that can again be subsumed under the heading of modernity. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, for example, the emerging epistemological scepticism of modernity led writers like Cervantes to express loss of faith in the written word through self-consciousness in their fiction. Similarly, in the eighteenth century, writers such as Sterne and Diderot chose to represent the ‘caprice of reality’ through the ‘caprice’ of fiction rather than realistically (pp. 76–77), exercising their artistic autonomy and imagination in the face of a prevalent materialistic determinism. The nineteenth century witnessed the decline of metafiction in favour of realistic imagination, however, enabling a reflection on reality and the world with its dominant spirit of being enamored of human psychology and the forces of history, in particular of the figure of Napoleon.

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<sup>78</sup>Robert Alter, ‘Mimesis and the motive for fiction’, 228–249; Robert Alter, *Partial Magic The Novel as a Self-Conscious Genre* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1978), p. 3.

<sup>79</sup>Alter, *Partial Magic*, p. xi.

The period of modernism, on the other hand, owing to its sense of pending apocalypse which, as discussed in the preceding chapter, rendered the world intractable to imagination, experienced a revival of metafiction: art and literature became the tool for understanding an incomprehensible world. Alter also identifies a number of features which define self-conscious fiction in general. These are a teasing relationship with the reader, a demonstration of human order in chaos, and an implicit focus on mortality.<sup>80</sup>

Returning to Belyi's *Petersburg* and *The Silver Dove*, the evidence for metafiction or self-conscious writing that highlights its own nature as literature appears to be ambiguous. Whereas Belyi would not have fully accepted this description of his works, given that metafiction implies the impossibility of an ultimate meaning of a fiction, there are aspects of his work which are overtly metafictional.<sup>81</sup> Therefore, it seems difficult to make a case either way for postmodern metafiction having further developed from modernism or not. Are other modernist works more conclusive? Certainly, *The Master and Margarita* exhibits certain aspects of self-conscious writing: the master's writing of fiction.<sup>82</sup> However, even though this novel could be regarded as displaying a certain self-conscious dimension, this would appear to have been a kind of by-product, rather than a justifiable description of the novel as a whole, given its gesturing towards a transcendent reality.

Patricia Waugh uses the term 'metafiction' to denote 'fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction

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<sup>80</sup>Alter, *Partial Magic*.

<sup>81</sup>v. Keys, *The Reluctant Modernist*, pp. 220–222, 231.

<sup>82</sup>Cf. Russell, p. 227; for a discussion of self-consciousness in the works of the Soviet writers Leonid Leonov, Marietta Shaginian and Veniamin Kaverin, see David Shepherd, *Beyond Metafiction*.

and reality'.<sup>83</sup> At the same time, she specifies that '[m]etafiction explicitly lays bare the conventions of realism; it does not ignore or abandon them' (p. 18). Hence, metafiction is bound to realistic poetics, and excludes itself from modernism. Waugh writes of modernist self-consciousness that, 'though it may draw attention to the aesthetic construction of the text, [it] does not "systematically flaunt its own condition of artifice"'.<sup>84</sup> This seems to be supported by the above suggestion that metafiction was a subordinate dimension in Russian modernism.

Now, if Waugh's concept of metafiction is right, then the claim of the self-consciousness of postmodern literature presupposes a return to realistic aesthetics, and indeed, some scholars, like John Barth, view postmodernism as a synthesis of modernism and realism.<sup>85</sup> Alter finds postmodern metafiction formative in Nabokov's works, which exhibits a higher degree of self-consciousness than modernism.<sup>86</sup> The implicit view of postmodernism, in this regard, is therefore one of heightened modernism. In a word, the correlation between metafiction and postmodernism is debatable, and our later discussion of works by Sorokin and Tuchkov will shed light on some self-conscious elements which foreground the literary process. While the works of Sorokin and Tuchkov have a central metafictional quality, this may mainly be a continuation of the Russian self-conscious tradition rather than speak of truly postmodern poetics.

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<sup>83</sup>Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1984), p. 2.

<sup>84</sup>Waugh, *Metafiction*, p. 21, citing Alter, *Partial Magic*, p. x.

<sup>85</sup>Eysteinsson, pp. 113–114.

<sup>86</sup>Alter, *Partial Magic*, pp. 180–217.

### 4.2.3 Pastiche and Parody

Of similar contested status relative to postmodernism are the concepts of pastiche and parody. Both were used by the modernist writer Joyce, and as has already been pointed out, Kharm's dialogicity was very parodic; however, dialogicity and pastiche in both writers ultimately engaged with the values embodied in the 'mocked' canon.

In its etymological sense, the word pastiche is derived from the Italian *pasticcio* and denotes 'a paté of various ingredients — a hodgepodge of meat, vegetables, eggs, and a host of other variable additions'.<sup>87</sup> However, in literature, it has come to denote literary imitation. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as a 'work, esp. of literature, created in the style of someone or something else; a work that humorously exaggerates or parodies a particular style' (*OED*).

In fact, pastiche is best discussed in conjunction with parody, since both seem often to run together in the works studied, to an extent which may make it difficult to judge whether a stylised narration is pastiche or parody or indeed both, or whether pastiche is partially informed by a parodic spirit or not. Whereas *pastiche* is widely understood as an uncritical imitation of another person's style or manner of writing, *parody* for our purposes is best viewed as an imitation which is informed by a mocking, ironic or satirical distance. We might also adopt Simon Dentith's distinction between 'specific' and 'general' parody, with the first being directed at a specific work of art or literature, whereas the second uses a whole style or discourse as its hypotext.<sup>88</sup> Again, these two versions of parody will be seen to intermingle in the

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<sup>87</sup>Ingeborg Hoesterey, 'Postmodern Pastiche: A Critical Aesthetic', *Centennial Review*, 39 (1995), pp. 493–510 (p. 493).

<sup>88</sup>Simon Dentith, *Parody* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 193–194.

‘postmodern’ texts to be discussed.

The postmodern theoretician Fredric Jameson regards pastiche as characteristic of postmodernism (which in his discourse is synonymous with late capitalism) and its associated ‘nostalgia mode’ and ‘plagiarism’ of older cultural products, as part of our age’s cultural production. We are ‘condemned to seek the historical past through our own pop images and stereotypes about that past, which itself remains forever out of reach.’<sup>89</sup>

Jameson writes that ‘[b]oth pastiche and parody involve the imitation or, better still, the mimicry of other styles and particularly of the mannerisms and stylistic twitches of other styles.’<sup>90</sup> Modernist literature and, indeed culture in general, he argues, is rich in material inviting parody, because of the unique and peculiar styles that are the hallmark of a number of great writers, thinkers and composers, ranging from D. H. Lawrence to Heidegger, and from Sartre to Prokofiev.

Parody, on the other hand, may be defined as a mark of modernism itself. Jameson further argues that ‘there remains somewhere behind all parody the feeling that there is a linguistic norm in contrast to which the styles of the great modernists can be mocked.’<sup>91</sup> Postmodernism, however, shows a tendency to reject the notion that there exists a normal language, speech or linguistic norm with its burden of values. This he sees as evident in what he calls ‘immense fragmentation and privatization of modern literature — its explosion into a host of distinct styles and mannerism’,<sup>92</sup> a phenomenon that he interprets as the cultural equivalent of the social fragmentation wit-

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<sup>89</sup>Fredric Jameson, ‘Postmodernism and Consumer Society’, in *Modernism/Postmodernism*, ed. by Peter Brooker (London and New York: Longman, 1992) pp. 163–179 (p. 171).

<sup>90</sup>Jameson, ‘Postmodernism and Consumer Society’, p. 166.

<sup>91</sup>Jameson, pp. 166–167.

<sup>92</sup>Jameson, p. 167.

nessed by him. The postmodern impossibility of parody has been caused precisely by this all-permeating stylistic heterogeneity which has resulted in a fragmentation of values. Hence, parody is replaced by pastiche, or what Jameson terms ‘blank parody’.<sup>93</sup> Pastiche is, Jameson argues,

like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language: but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody’s ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter, without that still latent feeling that there exists something *normal* compared to which what is being imitated is rather comic.<sup>94</sup>

Jameson’s usage of the phrase ‘ulterior motive’ in this quotation could possibly be replaced by Bakhtin’s definition of parody as a ‘semantic intention that is directly opposed to the original tone.’<sup>95</sup>

Both Tuchkov and Sorokin, and also Khurgin and Tolstaia in *Kys’*, draw heavily on the *topoi*, forms and genres of nineteenth-century Russian litera-

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<sup>93</sup>Iurii Tynianov, who, like Bakhtin, used the term ‘stylisation’ for what Western scholars seemingly prefer to call ‘pastiche’, argued in his discussion of the parody of various aspects of Gogol’s writing in Dostoevsky’s œuvre that, in fact, stylisation and parody, though distinct phenomena, are closely related; parody involves a recognisable contrary, and often unnecessary relationship between its subject and its object. Tynianov further defined a differentiation that is parallel to that between parody and stylisation: ‘parodiinost’ and ‘parodichnost’. The former describes an intention to consciously engage with another text, character or style, whereas the latter lacks such a semantic engagement [*Dostoevskii i Gogol’ (K teorii parodii)* (Letchworth, Herts and London: Prideaux, 1975), pp. 9, 22, 47; cf. Robert Porter, *Russia’s Alternative Prose* (Oxford and Providence: Berg, 1994), pp. 22.

<sup>94</sup>Jameson, p. 167 (emphasis in original).

<sup>95</sup>Bakhtin, ‘Discourse in Dostoevsky’, in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, pp. 181–269 (p. 193).



ture, as well as of Soviet literature and official Soviet discourse and related ideological symbols, thereby arguably transforming Russian literature and Soviet Socialist discourse itself into their principal subject matter. Tuchkov and Sorokin rely on the language and ideas of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky above all, but also on those of other writers. Tuchkov uses Tolstoy's didactic peasant stories and fables as a template for his short stories, and Sorokin also copies the styles of these writers, to exorbitantly grotesque effect. Tuchkov's, and even more so Sorokin's, use of the language of nineteenth-century lyrical prose and of idyllic countryside descriptions and also Sorokin's imitation of socialist realist literature, seem to raise expectations at first of the presence of a meaningful plot. Against all expectation, however, the narratives of Sorokin turn into a cascades of graphic and barbaric violence, sadism, masochism and cannibalism, accompanied by a carnivalesque portrayal of lower body parts and their functions and products. Although the case of Tolstaia's *Kys'* is somewhat different, she achieves a similar effect of foregrounding literature as the novel's main theme by constantly introducing literary names and quotations into the novel, something which is done through the direct and free indirect speeches of the characters.

Such a stylistic heteroglossia, a confrontation of a specific style with a plot that cannot be reconciled with the former because of its contrary world-view and philosophy,<sup>96</sup> certainly in the case of Sorokin and to a lesser extent in that of Tuchkov, may cause the reader to respond with shock and disgust. However, such violence to the reader's aesthetic expectations can be explained as criticism, and therefore *Aufarbeitung*, of the past abuse of aesthetics for ideological ends, and is comparable to the workings of *sots-art*. Ulrich Schmid proposes that

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<sup>96</sup>Cf. Golubkov, p. 80; Groys, *Die Erfindung Rußlands*, p. 209.

[a]esthetic shock as a literary device is not an attack primarily on morality or beauty but on aesthetics itself — in the etymological sense of the word (perception). The artistic transformation of everyday life into what it really was — a monstrous disaster — presents things that previously seemed to be known in a new light [...] Sorokin uncovers the material core of signifying processes.<sup>97</sup>

Furthermore, the confrontation between the idyllic beauty invoked by classical style and ugly plot can also be interpreted as a mixture of carnivalistic, humoristic and grotesque elements, since it turns the hierarchy of literature and its implicit values upside down, and since it operates on the principle of incongruity. Moreover, it reverses the positions of ugliness and beauty: the ruling principle of aesthetics and art, beauty, is pushed aside, ridiculed, caricatured by the dominance of violence and the non-aesthetic. Ultimately, however, because the ugly is recognised as having assumed a place that it does not deserve, the contrary effect occurs: the ugly ends up being ridiculed and presented as comic.<sup>98</sup>

Bakhtin had argued the following of hybrid dialogical constructions: an expression, even if syntactically and compositionally associated with a single speaker, can blend two styles, languages, ways of speaking, world views and value systems. Even though what Bakhtin had in mind was the existence of different voices or discourses embodied by the narrator and possibly numer-

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<sup>97</sup>Ulrich Schmid, 'Flowers of Evil: The Poetics of Monstrosity in Contemporary Russian Literature (Erofeev, Mamleev, Sokolov, Sorokin)', *Russian Literature*, 48 (2000), pp. 205–222 (p. 218).

<sup>98</sup>Dagmar Burkhart, 'Ästhetik der Häßlichkeit and Pastiche im Werk von Vladimir Sorokin', in *Poetik der Metadiskursivität: Zum postmodernen Prosa-, Film und Dramenwerk von Vladimir Sorokin*, ed. by Dagmar Burkhart (Munich: Sagner, 1999), pp. 9–19 (p. 10).

ous characters within a specific narrative, one could transfer this model to the fiction of Tuchkov, Sorokin and Tolstaia. This can be done by viewing the style used as representing a ‘voice’ in itself, even though it is not a speaking and acting character. The style used, that is stylisation, pastiche and/or parody of classical literature and socialist realism, is an integral part of the respective piece of literature. Therefore, by virtue of itself being present and even more so being often foregrounded, Russian classical and socialist realist literature is a silent ‘voice’, in varying degrees representing realist, moralist and ideological discourses which criticise the otherwise absurd, nihilistic, violent and psycho-pathological plots. Our brief exposition of Tolstaia’s *Kys*’ reflects the validity of such an approach, in that the novel seems to show that the implied author ascribes precisely such significance to the values of the classics in a deeply disturbing fictional world of wreckage that otherwise offers no grid of meaning for its inhabitants.

If, in an ‘ideal’ postmodern world, there really were no such absolutes as right and wrong, or good and evil,<sup>99</sup> then none of these could be perceived as such. However, even in the fiction of Sorokin, it is obvious to the reader what behaviour or actions are ‘abnormal’, pathological, evil or wrong. In the fiction of Tuchkov, Khurgin, and in *Kys*’, such moral perspective is sometimes offered within a diegesis, for example in the pronouncement of the narrator or through interior monologue or free indirect speech of a character and through the semantic structure of *skaz* narration (to be discussed in Chapters 6 and 7). Not so, however, in the works of Sorokin, whose diegeses are normally characterised precisely by the ever-present absurdity and incomprehensibility

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<sup>99</sup>This is not to say that postmodernism is by definition bereft of morality. As argued earlier, postmodern morality is relativistic and particularistic, rejecting notions of the universality and attainability of truth, however.

of his grotesquely violent worlds. This is not the whole story, however. The ‘silent voice’ of the Russian literary giants is indirectly present because their style is used, and their outlook on the world is inextricably linked to their works. Thereby, ideological ‘judgement’ is implicitly cast upon the plots and characters. This could be regarded as dialectical function.<sup>100</sup>

In their day, Russian classical and socialist realist literature were certainly regarded as authoritative discourse, and they may remain so even beyond their time. Bakhtin argued that someone else’s discourse can be employed by an author as ‘authoritative’ and ‘internally persuasive discourse’:

‘[t]he authoritative word demands that we acknowledge it [...] we encounter it with its authority already fused to it. The authoritative word is located in a distanced zone, organically connected with a past that is felt to be hierarchically higher. It is, so to speak, the word of our fathers. Its authority was already *acknowledged* in the past. It is a *prior* discourse. It is given (it sounds) in lofty spheres, not those of familiar contact. [...] It can be profaned. It is akin to taboo, i.e., a name that must not be taken in vain. . . .’<sup>101</sup>

Furthermore, one important aspect of pastiche can be the desire to appreciate and come to terms with the object of pastiche. According to Ingeborg Hoesterey, Proust, for example, approached the pastiche ‘not so much [as]

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<sup>100</sup>The *OED* defines ‘dialectical’ as ‘the existence or working of opposing forces, tendencies, to the process of thought by which such contradictions are seen to merge themselves in a higher truth that comprehends them’ (*OED*).

<sup>101</sup>Bakhtin, ‘The Dialogic Imagination’ in *The Bakhtin Reader: Selected Writings of Bakhtin, Medvedev, Voloshinov*, ed. by Pam Morris (London and New York: Arnold, 1994), p. 78 (emphases in original).

writing but reading — pastiche as the ideal form of creative activity, as *Au-seinandersetzung*, the coming to grips of a writer with the works of revered authors.<sup>102</sup> Hoesterey writes that

[t]he dialogical mode of pastiche becomes a central concern of aesthetic production in the postmodern arts. Confronted with the vast archive of the artistic tradition, the postmodern writer, visual artist, composer consciously acknowledges this past by demonstratively borrowing from it [...].<sup>103</sup>

In a way, the above statements of Bakhtin and Hoesterey could apply to writings by Tolstoy, Turgenev and others invoked in the works of Sorokin, Tolstaia and Tuchkov, even though it may be objected that such classical works are effectively profaned by being used in gruesome contexts. Lipovetsky argues that Sorokin's intention is to

deconstruct not a certain discourse, but the entire concept of literature. That is why his pastiche is directed not only at traditional or Socialist Realism, but at the classics of modernism, literature *per se*, at least in the eyes of Sorokin's generation.<sup>104</sup>

We suggest, and will further demonstrate in due course, that, while it may appear that Sorokin, Tuchkov and Tolstaia (in *Kys'*) use pastiche and parody and other invocations of the classics with the intention of deconstructing the notion of literature, this very object of parody can be dialectically conceptualised as an indirectly 'persuasive discourse'. It is, to return to the

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<sup>102</sup>cited by Hoesterey, p. 496.

<sup>103</sup>Hoesterey, p. 496.

<sup>104</sup>Lipovetsky, 'Russian Literary Postmodernism in the 1990s', p. 47 (emphasis in original).

explanatory model we here suggested, an act as awe-inspired as the beholding of the ruins and the testing of its figurative building substance. Furthermore, the issue of engaging with past authoritative discourses, such as classical and social realist literature or Soviet ideological language and symbols, an engagement which arguably would appear never straightforwardly deconstructionist and always ambivalent, might well be subsumed as well under the German term *Aufarbeitung*, which we discussed in the first section of this chapter. The often playful and humorous character of post-Soviet fiction may well contain a therapeutic, and hence constructive, function of both *Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung* and *Gegenwartsbewältigung*; McGhee writes that '[i]t is difficult to be angry, frightened or depressed if one is in a playful mood'.<sup>105</sup>

### 4.3 Conclusions

It may be worthwhile recalling what has been the connecting thread of the items discussed here, namely humour and related categories, and various fictional strategies which foreground literature as a central subject in its own right. The provisional conclusions of this largely theoretical discussion amount to two main lines of thought. First, post-Soviet fiction appears to exhibit a spirit of critical and therapeutic *Aufarbeitung* of the Soviet period and the role which ideology ascribed to language and aesthetics, as well as a concern for the state of society and individuals during a time of profound change. Second, contemporary Russian literature is devoted to the *Aufarbeitung* of cultural catastrophe and tragedy. While the aesthetic strategies aimed at coming to terms with the loss of an entire world may embody critical and parodic attitudes towards it, such play appears to be framed and

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<sup>105</sup>McGhee, p. 231.

mitigated at the level of composition and narrative worlds through the firm insistence that the vestiges of the pre-existing literature still speak to the hearts and minds of Russian men and women, and do so more effectively than anything else. Indeed, the character of Russian literature implicit in some post-Soviet works lies in its having been accorded a therapeutic and sometimes even redemptive quality. These two overarching functions may be taken as concepts for the writers' approach to writing, literature and the world. As such, they ultimately constitute positive responses to the absurdity and chaos that the authors and, of course, their contemporary fellow countrymen and -women, have experienced. For these reasons, the post-Soviet writers in question appear to continue to fulfill the traditional Russian role of socially responsible writing, even if, at the first glance, there is nothing but parody to be found in their works. Moreover, the fact is that such semantic intentions can be derived from literary analysis of the motifs, structure and overall composition of narrative worlds of the works in question. Analysis based exclusively on plot and style might allow the reader to see nothing but meaninglessness, a fact that appears to place post-Soviet poetics in the typological vicinity of Russian modernism, something that suggests the use of 'neo-modernism'. The remaining chapters are intended to employ these theoretical considerations with a view to illuminating central questions and features inherent in post-Soviet 'neo-modernist' Russian literature.

## Chapter 5

# The ‘Gnostic’: Vladimir Sorokin

*Write to amuse? What an appalling suggestion!*

*I write to make people anxious and miserable and to  
worsen their indigestion.*<sup>1</sup>

— Wendy Cope, *Serious Concerns*

In the preceding chapters, we developed a framework for approaching post-Soviet Russian fiction in terms of underlying philosophical affiliation with Russian modernism and of a humorous, liberating treatment of the past. To confirm these suggestions through more applied, text-based discussions, we may now turn to a consideration of Vladimir Sorokin’s fiction. Sorokin, universally cited and discussed as one of the most characteristically ‘postmodern’ Russian writers, has been very productive across genres and art media, creating a large range of short stories, novels, plays and even film scripts. We shall focus our discussion on his novel *The Blue Fat* (*Goluboe salo*),<sup>2</sup> which is one of his later, maturer and arguably best works and which embodies many, if not most, of the thematic and stylistic pre-occupations

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<sup>1</sup>Wendy Cope, *Serious Concerns* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1992), p. 15.

<sup>2</sup>Vladimir Sorokin, *Goluboe salo*, 6th edn (Moscow: Ad Marginem, 2002).



that characterise his *œuvre*. The present chapter aims to discuss *The Blue Fat* within the theoretical framework developed earlier and as fully as possible, within the limits of one chapter. We will occasionally refer to further works by Sorokin, for comparative purposes. The discussion will mostly focus on the nature of the novel's narrative worlds and its metaphorical implications. The most salient feature of Sorokin's poetics is that his texts evade straightforward interpretation, indeed they often appear meaningless and absurd. While his works contain discernible plots, the reader is often stupefied and irritated by the absence of any recognisable motivation for what happens, both at the level of character action and interaction and at the syntagmatic or structural level of the plot in general. However, it will be suggested below that Sorokin's work is loaded with meaning.

## 5.1 The Narrative World of *The Blue Fat*

Let us look first at the novel's plot and syntagmatic structure. It has three different narrative worlds, consisting of different geographical and temporal settings and deictic shifts between them. The first, the frame as it were, is set in Siberia in 2068, forty years after a nuclear disaster in Oklahoma in 2028. China exercises cultural hegemony over Russia, to the point even of permeating its language: the spoken language is interspersed with many Chinese words as well as with French, English and German borrowings, while the language of swearing, which seems to be the register most commonly used, appears to be predominantly Chinese. In a genetic laboratory in Yakutia, Russian scientists are experimenting with Dostoevsky-2, Tolstoy-4, Chekhov-3, Akhmatova-2, Pasternak-1 and Nabokov-7, half-human, half-mechanical clones of the Russian writers in question. As a side-product of their literary

work, these clones cultivate 'blue fat' in their bellies, a unique substance which does not change its temperature under any circumstance and which is valued as an energy source as well as a drug. The writers' clones produce a number of literary texts with strong parodic allusions to the literary works and style of the authors they are cloning or of other Russian writers, works that are filled with violence and sexual content. Akhmatova-2 produces a 'poem' extolling comrade Akhmat's sexual exploitation of three village women; Platonov-3 has written a story about the Red Army fighting the White Guard; Chekhov-3 has a play outwardly reminiscent of *Cherry Orchard*; Nabokov-7 writes about the bizarre intimacies of a certain couple; Pasternak-1 writes an absurd sexual poem; Tolstoy-4 produces chapters narrating and celebrating decadent, animalistic and sadistic forms of life on a country estate. This part of the novel is narrated through a series of letters which are sent by the 'biophilologist' Boris to a male lover, by means of vicious carrier birds, letters in which he tells the former about his life and work in the laboratory.

The second part or fragment of the novel begins with a raid on the laboratory and the 'blue fat' so far produced by a group belonging to the religious-style and militant sect-like order of *zemleby*. After killing some of the staff working in the laboratory, they get hold of the 'blue fat' and flee on a USSR-made 'antediluvian snowmobile' (p. 122). Their brotherhood lives in a tunnel running deep down into the earth. Like a relay run, the 'blue fat' is handed over again and again. After entering their tunnel, the raiders hand it over to some superior, who then moves down the tunnel into some premises where the 'blue fat' is handed over to a different holder; the new bearer of the 'blue fat' then moves further down the tunnel and is relieved of his treasure, peacefully or violently, by someone senior to him. This pattern repeats

itself numerous times. By witnessing these deliveries and moving with the strange characters through the subterranean colony, the reader is introduced to the secretive, sectarian, violent and perverted character of the colony and its inhabitants. The reader is presented with different interactions between *zemleby* and their schism with a related order in the Volga region, with which the Northern Siberian order has lived in enmity since the V. Council of 2026. Individual characters do not seem to be important in the novel, as any character in the narrator's focus at any time is very quickly replaced by some other character, to whom the 'blue fat' is relayed. There are some scenes and conversations which particularly warrant closer examination, however, and this will be done in a later section of the chapter. The fragment ends with a messenger of the order being sent by time machine back to the year 1954 to deliver the blue fat to Stalin, Khrushchev and Beria in Moscow, where he arrives in an ice cubicle.

The next section is set in a time characterised by the following: England has been destroyed by atomic bomb, Stalin and Hitler have won the Second World War and share power over Europe; America has murdered six million Jews. Stalin and Count Khrushchev, a nobleman, are homosexual lovers, and Khrushchev has a torture chamber in the cellar of his estate in which he tortures young men to death and has his chef serve up their flesh at dinner parties held with Stalin. Stalin, his incestuous family and Khrushchev, having gained possession of the blue fat, flee to Berchtesgaden, outwitting Beria. There they are received as guests by their ally Hitler and a company consisting of Eva Braun, Leni Riefenstahl, Ribbentrop, Göring and Himmler. In Hitler's mountain retreat, they dine together and celebrate their reunion. With Stalin's consent, Hitler rapes his daughter. Stalin makes use of the time and runs off together with Himmler and the 'blue fat'. However, Hitler's

soldiers engage them in a shooting match, the Count dies and in a desperate move Stalin injects ‘blue fat’ into his own eyes. As a result, his brain begins to grow exponentially: it pushes the Alps into the sea, covers the entire planet Earth, causing it to depart from its orbit, and, eventually absorbs the sun and turns the other planets into satellites of its own. Roughly one hundred sixty and a half million years after Stalin injected himself with the ‘blue fat’, his brain has swallowed up the entire universe and transformed it into a black hole. Thirty four and a half billion years later, Iosif Stalin’s brain has shrunk again to its normal size, though still exceeding the mass of the sun by a factor of three hundred forty five thousand.

At this moment, which coincides with the novel’s end, Stalin wakes up, as butler to the self-absorbed youth to whom the biophilologist Boris from part one of the novel has been writing letters. The young man does not know what to do with the ‘blue fat’, and uses it as adornment for himself.

In the absence of discernible narrative logic and psychological depth to the characters, the plot itself appears to be largely absurd, as do most individual scenes in the novel, whose motivation is completely random. Such narrative absurdity is reinforced on the level of individual embedded diegeses (produced by the clones) which often are grotesque and parodic pastiches of the styles of Russian writers. Certain diegeses, while containing a recognisable plot, offer no direct semantic motivation for it. A number of embedded plots occur without the reader’s understanding of the purpose of such individual narrations, or indeed of their meaning and function relative to the novel as a whole. The embedded narrative ‘Tolstoy-4’ (pp. 93–109), presented as several chapters from a novel, is such an example. While this fragment contains a plot which is not difficult to understand, one describing bizarre scenes of abuse in a gentry setting, the reader is baffled, prompted to ask himself or

herself as to why this narrative was written, and in which way it is supposed to advance understanding of the novel overall: it appears to be meaningless, apart perhaps from its echoing and distorting of the familiar Tolstoyan theme of unity with nature. Other embedded pieces, like the poetry of Akhmatova-2 (pp. 49–57) and Pasternak-1 (pp. 90–93) seem to be pastiches of the styles of these two poets and of the absurd of Kharms: they appear utterly devoid of sense, if not surreal, even at the level of plot. Thus, the absurdity expressed at various levels in the novel's constituent intra-diegeses and at the level of the novel's overall plot complement each other in creating a narrative world in which whatever is spoken and done seems to be random and unmotivated, at least at the narratological level. One particular instance is that of presenting Hitler and Stalin as friends and allies, which, to a Soviet reader, is an absurd invention, since at first glance it is contrary to all reason.<sup>3</sup>

However, there is a central metaphorical element in the plot that does seem to bestow meaning on the novel: the 'blue fat' which is pursued by almost everyone in this world. As a mysterious substance, an invaluable source of energy around which the entire novel revolves, it has been interpreted aesthetically by one critic as a 'metaphor for literature, the mighty magic of word and art'.<sup>4</sup> This 'blue fat' is produced by the writing clones in special Siberian laboratories, we discover, and it is a substance that does not seem to change its temperature phase;<sup>5</sup> it is immutable, eternal and the most valued resource in the world of the novel (see p. 158). It is proposed

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<sup>3</sup>On the other hand, of course, this is less absurd than may appear at first glance, since the respective historical figures were indeed political partners for some time and did show some like-mindedness in how they created and maintained a totalitarian state as well as in their relations with smaller nations in their geographical neighbourhood.

<sup>4</sup>Lipovetsky, 'Russian Literary Postmodernism in the 1990s', p. 47.

<sup>5</sup>In physics and chemistry, 'phase' denotes an element's or substance's solid, liquid or gaseous state.

here that in the novel's fictional world, the 'blue fat' is, in addition to its implied aesthetic value as representing the magic of literature, also equipped with supernatural, transcendent characteristics: there is no chemical element known to man that would not change state or phase under the influence of a change in temperature, for example. The 'blue fat' is a substance that cannot be categorised by human science — it is therefore something more than matter, and has a spiritual or esoteric nature. The critic Aleksandr Genis argues that the 'blue fat' embodies the notion of spirit incarnate and of the 'pinnacle of divine transformation'.<sup>6</sup> In this novel, literature, therefore, while essentially an aesthetic category, has, at the same time, a significant transcendent and spiritual dimension. It appears to be an embodiment of the spiritual. Sorokin himself explains the metaphor of 'sky-blue fat' as 'heavenly food': '[н]аши писатели всегда стремились духовно накормить народ. Чем может насытиться мужик? Хлебом с салом. А поскольку речь идёт о пище духовной, то есть небесной, у меня родилась такая метафора.'<sup>7</sup>

Despite the impossibility of deriving overarching meaning through conventional reconstruction of the actions and speeches of characters and narrators, there might nonetheless be a higher implied authorial position to be detected at the metaphorical level. In the nightmarish and repulsive world of *The Blue Fat*, there still are 'ruins of glory' with their potentially validating redemptive hope to be found in literature as a pursuit itself, as well as in what remains of Russia's literary traditions. In Chapter 4 we suggested the possibility that, even though the classics are parodied and stylised in various post-Soviet works, including Sorokin's *The Blue Fat*, they nevertheless

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<sup>6</sup>Aleksandr Genis, *Ivan Petrovich umer. Stat'i i rassledovaniia* (Moscow: NLO, 1999), p. 81 (own translation).

<sup>7</sup>Cited by Boris Sokolov, *Moia kniga o Vladimire Sorokine* (Moscow: AIRO, 2005), p. 59.

embody one of the ‘voices’ or viewpoints that are present in such works. In *The Blue Fat*, therefore, the grotesque and essentially meaningless nature of its narrative world is thrown into ironic relief if the ‘voices’ of the classics are taken into account, associated as they are with a certain moral, ethical and spiritual dimension, as well as with unsurpassed literary achievement. Both at the metaphorical or paradigmatic and the compositional level, therefore, literature, present through Russia’s classical and modernist literary canon, is the only meaningful element in the novel, even though it may be parodied at the level of style. Thus, while there is an element in Sorokin’s poetics which embodies a ‘jesting’ or *iurodivyi* approach, full of outward parody and deconstruction, this same element at the same time affirms transcendental seeking in the undercurrents of his work. Lesley Milne’s assertion a propos of Il’f and Petrov, that literary parody does not necessarily have to be seen as a criminal or sacrilegious act, but rather as a positive sign of familiarity and engagement with literary tradition,<sup>8</sup> would add weight to our view of Sorokin, that his portrayal of an absurd narrative world against the background of the Russian literary canon indirectly questions the absurdity and meaninglessness of his narrative world. Recalling also our earlier discussion of carnival, the Russian classics appear to come out of the parodic world of *The Blue Fat* reinvigorated. It is therefore suggested that Sorokin’s deconstruction and parodies ultimately embody moral concerns, as will be discussed in greater depth below.

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<sup>8</sup>Milne, *How They Laughed*, p. 262.

## 5.2 Moral Concerns

One key moral theme is revealed in the intra-diegetic narration entitled ‘The Swimming Competition’ (‘Zaplyv’, pp. 137–144), which is a story that Sorokin had written independently as one of his first works at the age of 22.<sup>9</sup> This is narrated by a ‘master’ of the *zemleeby* to his superior, Savelii, on the occasion of the latter receiving the blue fat from the former. The master tells Savelii about a surreal experience that he has been having, namely a small child’s hands made of ‘living gold’ appear from his own hand and relate through gestures resembling sign language a number of things, including the tale ‘The Swimming Competition’. ‘The Swimming Competition’ is narrated without reference to time or location; it concerns one Ivan Monakhov, an outstanding and long-serving swimmer-soldier of the ‘river agitation corps’, who is taking part in a parade. The parade consists of naked soldiers who for five hours formation-swim in an unnamed ice-cold river, each holding high a huge torch weighing six kilograms in their right hands. The group is arranged according to a verbal sequence, each of the swimmers standing for a single letter or sign within it; Ivan is the comma. When he swims at night, he is enraptured by the star constellation of the ‘Seventh Way’, one star of which is named after Andreas Kapidich, ‘Великого Преобразователя Человеческой Природы’ (p. 140). At a command from the Marshal of the river agitation corps the exercise begins. Before the reader discovers the gruesome end of the parade, he is informed of Ivan’s personal history. Ivan loves his profession and his impressive, muscular right arm which has undergone special training and electrotherapy. He has experienced four years of hard exercise in the ‘ВВАП (военно-водно-агитационная подготовка)’ and can no longer imagine life without nights spent swimming in the river, without

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<sup>9</sup>Sokolov, p. 137.



the torches, and without the 'leaden pain' experienced when he carries his torch. He is promoted and receives medals and awards. The exercise, however, ends in disaster, since Ivan's torch bursts at the crucial moment. As a result, oil leaks out of the torch's container, and he is transformed into a living fire-brand. On the city's river banks, five hundred and thirteen people about whom the narrator says that 'каждый из них стоил миллиардов простых смертных' (p. 144), observe the ceremony. They all mysteriously appear to know why Ivan's torch has burst, and thunderously applaud from a 'Особое Пространство с бронзовыми берегами, золотыми дворцами и невидимыми храмами' (ibid).

What can be said of the above intra-diegesis? First of all, the narrative world is governed by a ruling elite which practises ideological indoctrination. This is evidenced by the reference to a holy book and the founder of a 'better' society. Furthermore, a limited number of people are said to have incomparably greater value than the rest of society. Ivan wholeheartedly believes in the value of his mission, which to an outside observer appears redundant to the point of madness. He is proud to serve the state, however, that superior collective entity which he glorifies and which at the same time deprives him of all value as an individual. His family name, Monakhov, which relates to the Russian word *monakh* (monk), is possibly symbolic. Life as a monk in a religious order is traditionally associated with a very strict, reclusive and self-sacrificial existence at the service of an order or monastic community, and ultimately of God. The state in 'The Swimming Competition' itself is deified and glorified as 'great' (cf. the 'bronze embankments, golden palaces and invisible cathedrals' already referred to). Moreover, this is not just a socio-political form of organisation, but some metaphysical and super-human force, as embodied in references to the night sky and the mysterious group of 513

people. This impression is further reinforced by references to places made of bronze or gold, traditionally used in the crafting and adornment of sacramental vessels, holy places such as temples and altars, and idols (cf. the golden calf in the Book of Exodus). The underlying concept of the state depicted here is also an archaic one in which the state is endowed with a divine and patriarchal nature which enjoys unquestioned and absolute authority. The relationship of the people towards the state can correspondingly only be one of reverence and obedience.<sup>10</sup>

‘The Swimming Competition’ is, therefore, a parody of socialist realist literary conventions pertaining to the hero as an utterly committed soldier or industrial worker, and Ivan is a perfect, not to say exceedingly hyperbolic exemplar of the ‘moral masochism’ to be described in Chapter 6; therefore, one could infer that Sorokin is mocking and deconstructing socialist realist aesthetics of the machine-like worker or soldier, and its underlying ideology.<sup>11</sup> Sorokin is perhaps not only attacking the philosophical anthropology

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<sup>10</sup>In certain respects, the world described in this story is reminiscent of the *Edinoe Gosudarstvo* portrayed in Zamiatin’s *We*, where the state provides the absolute measure of authority, and where individuals are of no value *vis-à-vis* this collective entity. Individuals in *We* are mere numbers, made to believe that they are building a bright future, whereas in reality they are systematically enslaved and abused. The same state of mind, contempt for individual self-worth and equanimity towards repression and even mass killing for the imagined good of the collective, is also exhibited by Dostoevsky’s characters Shigalev and Petr Verkhovenski in *Devils* and, of course, in the ‘Grand Inquisitor’ episode of *The Brothers Karamazov*. Like the works mentioned here, Sorokin’s ‘The Swimming Competition’ also embodies a counterview by ironic implication, which is highlighted by means of exaggeration and the grotesque.

<sup>11</sup>Cf. Genis, ‘Postmodernism and Sots-Realism: From Andrei Sinyavsky to Vladimir Sorokin’, in: Epstein, Genis and Vladiv-Glover, *New Perspectives*, pp. 197–211 (p. 207). In this respect, of course, Sorokin stands in the tradition of Olesha and Zamiatin, who, in their respective works *Envy* and *We*, also criticised faith in machinery and the degradation

of socialism, however, but more generally that of modernity, infused with the philosophies of rationalism, reductionism and determinism, which had, of course, informed socialism. It posits that man is ultimately nothing but a cog in an impersonal wheel, devoid of autonomy. Hence, he could be seen as inheriting a major concern of Dostoevsky and Kharmis, who both tried to break out of the closed Euclidean cause-and-effect system. This view would also have the advantage of serving us in explaining why the characters in *The Blue Fat* are unlike traditional literary characters: they are far removed from having the depth of character and motivation that defines a Pechorin, Raskol'nikov or even Pavel Korchagin. In fact, the protagonists of the various intra-diegeses in *The Blue Fat* are mere puppets, one might say, heteronomous 'non-protagonists'. As such they represent, together with the novel's implied concern with history (to be dealt with in some detail below), the defeat of humanism and the loss of meaning in human existence (see Sections 5.2.2 and 5.2.3). This narrative's grotesque denouement perhaps reflects the implied authorial view that an ideology of so pervasive a kind as socialism, rooted in the philosophies that marked the age of modernity, ultimately leads to disaster.

Vladimir Sorokin manages to deconstruct the notion of Soviet communist utopia as such in 'The Swimming Competition', including the various ways of humans into machines. *Envy's* hero, Nikolai Kavalerov, expresses dislike for the ruthless 'new men', whereas Volodia Makarov envies and emulates them. In *We*, machine-like humans figure prominently, too. While Olesha's and Zamiatin's motivation by a moral concern for the autonomy of man is perhaps more easily recognisable as being implicit in their works than a similar attitude in Sorokin's work, the latter is informed by a somewhat similar concern about the death of man and the end of meaning in a closed rationalistic, cause-and-effect system, be it ideological or philosophical. Sorokin, however, investigates this question with a significant twist, by engaging with the transcendent, as will emerge more clearly as this chapter advances.

in which this utopia, as official programme, manifested itself, whether in art, submission of the individual, glorification of the state and its representatives and symbols, including the ‘new man’. According to Kasper, utopia and myth are closely related; utopia presents an ideal (*Wunschbild*) as reality, and can as such be regarded as pre-meditated myth. Just as early civilisations had their myths, he refers to the myth of the ‘new man’ as ‘pseudo-myth’, which the twentieth century’s totalitarian systems have created in order to achieve their political goals, using the corresponding cult, rituals, and taboos for imposing their authoritative interpretation of reality.<sup>12</sup> ‘In this sense, the great utopia of the “Soviet Union” had its myths — of the Party elite, of the unity of people and leader, of the “new” man, of the “Great Patriotic War” and of the invincible world power.’<sup>13</sup>

### 5.2.1 Humour

*The Blue Fat* contains a specific scene in which Stalin dines in the Kremlin with a number of selected guests, among them scientists and Politburo members, in order to celebrate the opening of the ‘House of Free Love’, while watching how the ice cone, which hosts the guest from the future and the blue fat, slowly melts.<sup>14</sup> Beriia, Kaganovich, Sakharov, Gerasimov,

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<sup>12</sup>Karlheinz Kasper, ‘Rußlands “Neue Seiten”: Russische Literatur in deutschen Übersetzungen’, *Osteuropa*, 54 (2004.1), 90–109 (p. 96).

<sup>13</sup>Kasper, p. 96 (own translation).

<sup>14</sup>The figure of the time traveller in the ice-cone is possibly an intertextual reference to Maiakovskii’s satirical plays *The Bedbug* (*Klop*) and *The Bathhouse* (*Bania*) [Vladimir Maiakovskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v trinadtsati tomakh*, ed. by A. V. Fevral’skii. *Tom odinnadtsati. Kinostsenarii i p’esyi 1926–1930* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1958), pp. 215–347]. While each play utilises a time machine, the scene in ‘The Blue Tablet’ in *The Blue Fat* which describes the Soviet leaders and scientists discussing the great event and waiting for the ice to melt, is reminiscent of the scientists’ voting to

Gurinovich, Shostakovich, Eisenstein, Bulganin, Molotov, Prince Vasilii, Malenkov, Mikoian, Landau and Aleksei Tolstoi, are present (p. 198). In the middle of the banqueting table is a roasted pig, whose head is modeled on the face of Trotskii, including his pince-nez. Over some 1945 vintage *Kindzmarauli*, Mikoian and Molotov propose a toast to truth. After some initial enthusiasm, Stalin hesitates, but then agrees to the toast, complaining that no-one of his entourage had ever proposed honouring truth before, despite communism's encompassing claim to 'truth'; thereby, Sorokin comically underlines the gap between Soviet rhetoric and reality.

The passage beginning with the above scene (pp. 208–213) is full of allusions to early Soviet Party politics and Politburo infighting, mocking them by describing the characters' behaviour and language as that of pubescent youths who have drunk too much alcohol. The passage also presents Stalin as an absolutist ruler with the right to deal with others and dispose of them as he pleases.

Science, or rather Soviet academia, represented by Landau and Sakharov, and culture represented by Shostakovich are also mocked in the same section (pp. 198–223). No less important, socialist realist literature, as well as the Soviet system of literary administration are equally subject to derision. Aleksei Tolstoi, when asked whether he is a 'master of words', hesitantly replies that he is a member of the Union of Writers, implying that there is no un-

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revive the vulgar Prisyppkin fifty years after he had been frozen in ice in Tambov (Scene 5 of *The Bedbug*). Whereas Maiakovskii's plays imply moral improvement of man with the passing of time and the progress of socialism, Sorokin's novel does the opposite, as shown further below.

conditional link between literature and the Union of Writers.<sup>15</sup> Tolstoi as a representative of socialist realism is physically beaten up by Stalin who hurls venison paté at him, after which Stalin remarks that this is what contemporary literature looks like. It appears, therefore, that Sorokin is mocking socialist realism and attacking its integrity and value as literature. In subsequent sections, more writers and poets are made fun of: Beriia quotes a line from Maiakovskii's 'Vladimir Il'ich Lenin' (p. 217), Bulganin expresses comically disappointment at the journal *Novyi mir* (p. 210), and Stalin states that he strongly dislikes Fadeev's *Molodaia gvardiia*, remarking also that 'Хармс своими глистами канареек кормит' (both p. 222); similarly, AAA (Anna Andreevna Akhmatova) and Osip/Os'ka (Mandelstam) appear — AAA, as an acquaintance of Stalin, addressing him with the words: 'Здравствуй, отец родной! Здравствуй, свет не вечерний! Здравствуй, спаситель наш!' (p. 221) and bowing down to the monument of Dzerzhinskii (p. 227). According to Lipovetsky, 'Sorokin simply replaces the proud dignity of martyrs with perverted self-abnegation and real suffering with sadomasochism'.<sup>16</sup>

We can identify various interconnected dimensions of humour, parody and the grotesque in the samples related above, which we will discuss here. The humour expressed makes use of the principles of carnival, incongruity

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<sup>15</sup>Both the question of truth and the twinkle-toed mockery of the Soviet Union of Writers are somewhat reminiscent of Bulgakov's *Master and Margarita*, in which Pilate asks Yeshua a similar question ('Что такое истина') and where Bulgakov makes fun of the official Soviet literary system. The reference by Tolstoi to membership of the Union of Writers is a direct intertextual reference to the scene in Bulgakov's novel where Behemoth and Korov'ev wish to have lunch in the exclusive restaurant of the Writers' House [in the novel's Chapter 28 'The Last Adventures of Korov'ev and Behemoth' ('Poslednie pokhozhdeniia Korov'eva i Begemota'), M. A. Bulgakov, *Sobranie sochinenii. Tom 8. Master i Margarita*, ed. by Ellendea Proffer (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1988), pp. 345–356].

<sup>16</sup>Lipovetsky, 'Russian Literary Postmodernism in the 1990s', p. 43.

and surprise, as well as release. It is humour that operates according to carnivalistic principles, that is the principal of temporarily inverting the conventional structures of power and reality: literature, represented by the great *littérateurs* of Russian modernism and socialist realism, is portrayed as a fool's occupation. Surely the reader must think that such mockery of Russian men and women of letters, who have always striven to make a positive contribution to Russian society, amounts to an undeservedly debasing treatment, perhaps unlike the mockery of the figure of Stalin. However, as will become clearer in Section 5.2.4, *The Blue Fat* is permeated with an implied concern with the potential for abuse and manipulation that can inhere in an authoritative discourse or language, be that one of political ideology or of literary tradition, and especially where the two coincide, i.e. socialist realism. Furthermore, we established earlier (see Chapter 4) that in its effects, carnival cements the traditional power hierarchy. Therefore, as it would seem, the implied author also plays with his readers' shocked reaction. In a word, different aspects need be considered here simultaneously, even though these aspects may appear to stand in a relationship of tension with each other. The second humoristic dimension mentioned apropos of the above passage is that of psychic relief, in particular with regard to one of the novel's central protagonists, Stalin. The parodic references that critically deal with omnipresent ideology and that highlight the gap between official claims and reality, most obviously the hollow nature of the concept of truth in Soviet politics,<sup>17</sup> elicit laughter in the reader and can well be seen as fulfilling a socially and psychologically therapeutic, liberating function. Ellen Rutten suggests precisely this, something that coincides with our own suggestion made in Chapter 4

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<sup>17</sup>Viktor Pelevin similarly thematises this issue on various occasions in his novel *Generation «II»* (Moscow: Vagrius, 2000), e.g. pp. 9, 82–83, 276, and further works.

about post-Soviet literature being, to a significant degree, motivated by a desire to come to terms with the Soviet past. Relying on a range of theoretical concepts beginning with Aristotle concerning the therapeutic value of art, she proposes to approach Sorokin 'as a therapist, whose reworkings of the recent past enhance public "digestion" of the harrowing Soviet experience'<sup>18</sup> and 'allow the public to see, hear, feel, smell and taste the Soviet trauma and its heritage in post-Soviet culture'.<sup>19</sup> This therapeutic distillation of the essence of Soviet experience as it were, is produced through the creation of a sense of alienation based on submitting various socialist motifs, such as that of the 'new man' considered above, to grotesque exaggeration and caricature.

The comedy in this section, therefore, serves the same end as the *sots-art* story 'The Swimming Competition' and that played by the novel's third part: deconstruction and parody of Soviet history aimed at coming to terms with it. The scene in which Stalin and Khrushchev make love to each other is arguably as outrageous and sacrilegious to many as the thought of Stalin and Hitler being friends at all and ruling over Eurasia together. The list of such sacrileges could be multiplied: Khrushchev is a decadent aristocrat rather than a true communist, and the Russian language is reduced to some Eurasian gobbledygook; Stalin's brain swallows up the planet and eventually the whole universe before collapsing in on itself; an atomic catastrophe has taken place — all of this imagery addresses and deconstructs historical issues, like the megalomania and personality cult of Hitler and Stalin, as well as the Hitler-Stalin Pact which preceded World War II. All these issues are grotesquely alienated in such a way that they provide the reader with plenty of distance to critically engage with them. Wolfgang Kayser

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<sup>18</sup>Ellen Rutten, 'Art as Therapy. Sorokin's Strife [*sic!*] with the Soviet Trauma Across Media', *Russian Literature*, 65 (2009), pp. 539–559 (p. 539).

<sup>19</sup>Rutten, p. 552.



regarded the grotesque as expressing an ambivalent experience of the absurdities of existence, and as an ‘attempt to invoke and subdue the demonic aspects of the world’.<sup>20</sup> Philip Thomson writes similarly that the grotesque can ‘serve to bring the horrifying and disgusting aspects of human existence to the surface, there to be rendered less harmful by the introduction of a comic perspective’.<sup>21</sup> The fact that a related feature of Sorokin’s narratives, namely hyperbole, may have an ironic implication,<sup>22</sup> may shed further light on Sorokin’s narratives, suggesting that the plotlines which Sorokin’s reader encounters are not necessarily endowed with the implied author’s semantic approval, something that is not unlikely to be recognised as such by the Russian reader. The scenes discussed so far appear to be not only instances of deep implied authorial frustration with Soviet ideological discourse, but also with human and Russian history and the notion of progress in particular, thereby giving it an additional moral dimension beyond that of semiotic play with Soviet hagiography and myths.

### 5.2.2 The Notion of Progress

The world described in the first part of *The Blue Fat* is one of futuristic and militarised technological progress, a world governed by scientific advancement, encompassing for example the (albeit still imperfect) cloning of individuals who have been long dead. The second part, the world of the *zemleby*, depicts in many ways a counter-world. Although this is also a sophisticated society in the sense of it being characterised as an hierarchical

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<sup>20</sup>Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grottesque in Art and Literature*, trans. by Ulrich Weisstein (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1957), p. 188.

<sup>21</sup>Philip Thomson, *The Grottesque* (London: Methuen, 1972), p. 59.

<sup>22</sup>Linda Hutcheon, *Irony’s Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 149–152.

order, it represents a pre-civilisational era of cave people.<sup>23</sup> What these two diegetic worlds, as well as the third one of Stalin's Moscow, have in common, is that all the people depicted are essentially degenerate primitives; they use simple language and have grotesque physiques. Mentally, they are animals, lacking most signs of the moral dimension ordinarily attributed to humans; the qualitative distinction between man and non-man, be it animal or machine, and with it the significance of humanity, is seemingly lost.

These three worlds, two of them placed in the year 2068 and the third one in the year 1954, represent a challenge to the customary view of the history of mankind: despite his enormous technological and scientific progress, the essence of man, be it his moral, spiritual or social nature, has to be regarded as having regressed, or at least as not having progressed in any significant way. Only literature, in the metaphor of the blue fat, represents the potential to give depth, beauty and inspiration to human civilisation. One can conclude from all this that *The Blue Fat* ruthlessly mocks and deconstructs human history and with it any notion of human progress, as well as the holy myths of Russian identity and Soviet history. Moreover, the theme of an atomic bomb explosion in the year 2028 may reveal the implied author's disbelief in the notion that mankind and world politics have learned anything from the experience of the two World Wars, the genocides and the Cold War of the twentieth century. Potentially, this could be viewed as revealing the author's deep disillusionment with humanism and the modern notions of progress. The implied author of *The Blue Fat* appears to lament such a state of humanity, showing what man *is* like, as opposed to what man *ought*

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<sup>23</sup>Zamiatin's story 'The Cave' ('Peshchera') (1922) also depicts man, for all his technological progress, as morally regressive; the same theme will also be of importance for Tuchkov (see Chapter 6) and in Tolstaia's novel *Kys'*.

to be like. Man, having been reduced to non-man and supposedly being pre-determined to be who he is, must accept the impossibility of true autonomy and morality. Unless, of course, he finds a way of escaping from this box, an issue to be developed further below in Section 5.3.2.

One might argue that *The Blue Fat*, with its portrayal of human and Russian history, speaks of a deep frustration. Could not the picture of the visitor in the sewage-filled *Bol'shoi* theatre surrounded with excrement which summarises the intra-diegesis 'The Blue Tablet' ('Siniaia tabletka', pp. 160–167) also be interpreted as a metaphor of exasperation and anger? In psychology, a link is sometimes established between faeces or stool and a person's inner world, of a 'relationship between anal character-traits and authoritarianism' and between anal sadism and early toilet-training:<sup>24</sup>

Excrement becomes the symbol of all the badness and hate taken inside as oral privation [...] Withholding a stool as an act of defiance or passive resistance is a well-known nursery manifestation [...] But also, to be dirty and faecally uncontrolled is both disgraceful and weak; and it can become a more 'explosive' act of hate, defiance and rejection in the earliest war against authority [...] patients who [are] frustrated and enraged [...] have developed immediate diarrhoea or vomiting or both.<sup>25</sup>

However, the fact that Sorokin exposes the humanist project as failed does not necessarily mean that he rejects its possible validity outright. Rather, it appears that he is deeply concerned with the human condition and Russian

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<sup>24</sup>Norman Dixon, *On the Psychology of Military Incompetence* (Chatham: Pimlico, 1976), pp. 310–311.

<sup>25</sup>Henry V. Dicks, *Licensed Mass Murder: A Socio-Psychological Study of Some SS Killers* (London: Heinemann, 1972), p. 174.

history and society more generally. One could rather view it as a case of love through pain and dereliction. St Thomas Aquinas argued that anger, when motivated by justice and directed against injustice, can be a moral duty.<sup>26</sup> Or, if one accepts the substitution of the poem's addressee with 'humanity' or 'Russia', one might also cite another poem by Wendy Cope ('Defining the Problem'):

I can't forgive you. Even if I could,  
You wouldn't pardon me for seeing through you.  
And yet I cannot cure myself of love  
For what I thought you were before I knew you.<sup>27</sup>

As has already become evident, the novel is permeated with violence; it is mostly portrayed on the individual, inter-personal plane as being unmotivated and random. However, it is also displayed as systematic, encompassing politically inspired crimes of historic dimensions, such as the Holocaust (albeit ascribed to America); the annihilation of England; the Second World War (though won by Russia and Germany); the Russian revolution and atomic catastrophe. The twentieth-century historical equivalents of such diegetic events are often cited by critics as marking the beginning of postmodernism,<sup>28</sup> and Chapter 1 has shown how much the guiding paradigms of modernity, rationalism, determinism and reductionism, as well as the notion of progress, are subjected to criticism by postmodernism.

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<sup>26</sup>Aquinas, St Thomas, *Summa Theologicæ: Latin Text and English Translation, Introduction, Notes, Appendices and Glossaries*, ed. by Thomas Gilby and Thomas C. O'Brien (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode; New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964–76), XXIII, pp. 87–112 (Question 46); XXI, p. 109 (Question 60).

<sup>27</sup>Cope, p. 5.

<sup>28</sup>Cf. Jean-François Lyotard, 'Randbemerkungen zu den Erzählungen, in *Postmoderne und Dekonstruktion*, ed. by Peter Engelmann (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1990), p. 51.

Sorokin may, therefore, share this postmodern concern. However, as discussed in Chapter 2, Russian culture has generally been reluctant to embrace such Western modern notions and worldviews which postmodernism questions in the first place. Therefore, it might make more sense to view such shared criticism as a continuation of this same concern as evident in the works of Dostoevsky, Zamiatin and Kharms, even though Sorokin parodies them. There is, however, more to be said about his implicit philosophy, which will be addressed in due course. Meanwhile, let us turn to another central feature in *The Blue Fat*, that of Russia as a female body that has been violated.

### 5.2.3 Russian History and Culture

*The Blue Fat* contains a scene in which Savelii informs his fellow *zemleeb*, the master, that he has collected samples of Russian soil from the Kostroma region, from the bottom of Lake Baikal, as well as from beneath Red Square. Given that Savelii ascribes a certain metaphysical significance to these jars of earth, one wonders whether this might not be a reference to the cultural, historical and religious significance traditionally ascribed to the Russian soil.

It would appear that the soil may be an embodiment, or a *pars pro toto*, of what the notion of Russia stands for, the Russian soul, the country's beauty, its culture and history: the reader need only think of Father Zosima and later Alesha embracing and kissing the ground in *The Brothers Karamazov*,<sup>29</sup> reflecting the traditional Russian respect for the mother soil, as well as of Maksim Gor'ky's words about the impact of the Russian earth on its inhabitants: 'Lord have mercy, how agonizingly difficult it is to be Russian!

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<sup>29</sup>Dostoevskii, *Sobranie sochinenii. Tom deviatyi. Brat'ia Karamazovy*, pp. 406, 452 (Book VI, Chapter 3, and Book VII, Chapter 4).

For there is no other people which feels the earth's pull so profoundly, and there are no greater slaves of God on this earth than we, *Rus'*.<sup>30</sup> Of course, the image of fertilising or inseminating 'holy' soil is quite dominant in the novel, not only with milk or blood, but also in the mission of the *zemleebny*, which consists of copulation with the Russian soil (pp. 150–159). Epstein refers to a peasant tradition of ritual fertilisation of the earth that still existed in the twentieth century. He writes that a 'peasant who plowed and fertilized his fields could metaphorically see himself as a man impregnating his wife'.<sup>31</sup>

Much else could be said in support of the line of interpretation that Sorokin deconstructs, most likely out of a spirit of concern and anguish, the Russian cultural *topoi*, myths and leitmotifs that permeate *The Blue Fat*. Many of these motifs converge around the image of Russia as embodiment of femininity, as female body, and perhaps even womb.<sup>32</sup> In one of his later notes, Malevich, using just such an erotic metaphor, wrote of Russia as a black cube, into which Peter the Great, through his huge error, had beaten an opening. Malevich thereby suggested that the rays of Western Enlightenment robbed Russia of her virginity. Although informed by a relationship to the West that was contrary to that of Malevich, the philosopher Solov'ev's *œuvre* also contains references to the need for Russia to be fructified — this time by

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<sup>30</sup>Cited by Rancour-Laferrriere, p. v.

<sup>31</sup>Epstein, *After the Future*, p. 177; for an appreciation of the religious dimension of the 'Mother Earth' cult in Russian folk culture, see also Sinyavsky, *Ivan the Fool*, pp. 173–182.

<sup>32</sup>Yet another element in Sorokin's fiction, the ubiquity of *mat*, could potentially be illuminating. *Mat* is etymologically and culturally related to the issue of femininity and 'sadistic attitudes towards maternal images in Russia', which Rancour-Laferrriere identifies as the 'pre-Oedipal aspect of Russian obscenities' (Rancour-Laferrriere, pp. 140–141); therefore, there might be a degree to which Sorokin foregrounds an essentially sadistic and violent feature of this folkloristic attitude towards femininity.

the Western spirit.<sup>33</sup>

#### 5.2.4 Discourse and Violence

What happens in the scenes from *The Blue Fat* just mentioned is characteristic of Sorokin's poetics: a byword, a speech tradition, an automated phraseology, a rhetorical figure, a widely accepted metaphor is embodied and enacted, literally transferred from the paradigmatic level into reality and executed by Sorokin's characters at the syntagmatic level. The metaphor of Russia being inseminated by ideas, that we have already seen to be a common element in Russian philosophical discourse, is physically re-enacted by the *zemleby*. Sorokin thereby shows language's potentiality for violence, in a way that reminds us of Derrida's and Foucault's notion that the act of naming something is already an act of violence and injustice (cf. Chapter 1). A later scene from *The Blue Fat*, 'The Voice of Piatoi' ('Golos Piatogo'),<sup>34</sup> which is set within the narration of the festive concert for the opening at the *Bol'shoi* Theatre of the 'All-Russian House of Free Love', describes the arrival on stage of the ice cube from the future. Molotov, in an attempt to calm the crowd by announcing that what has happened was expected and of supreme importance for the Soviet state, asks the popular Siberian bard Piatoi to perform. Piatoi receives thundering applause and arouses great excitement

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<sup>33</sup>Boris Groys, 'Zurück in die Höhle: Am 9. 12. 1994 in Kabakovs Moskauer Atelier gehaltener Vortrag', trans. by Arne Ackermann, *Via Regia: Blätter für internationale kulturelle Kommunikation*, 48/49 (1997), 24–30 (p. 28).

<sup>34</sup>Like the embedded story examined earlier, 'The Swimming Competition', 'The Voice of Piatoi' seems to have been published independently of and before *The Blue Fat* as part of Sorokin's novel *Kontsert* (1997) (Susi K. Frank, 'Der untote Barde und die postapokalyptische Schreibweise Sorokins', *Via Regia: Blätter für internationale kulturelle Kommunikation*, 48/49 (1997), 83–88 (p. 88).

among the huge audience. He sings about his own coming death and three merciful sisters, the three virtues Faith (*Vera*), Hope (*Nadezhda*) and Love (*Liubov*'), who take samples of his blood, his bone-marrow, and pus from his prostate, in order to inject it into the trees in a snow-covered forest on the road from Moscow to Smolensk (pp. 179–180). This is another example of Sorokin's strategy in *The Blue Fat* of literally re-enacting figurative expressions, allegories and metaphors that relate to the act of procreation, and making use of culturally rooted notions concerning the femininity of Russia. Taken together, they create the image of Russia as a female body that is violated<sup>35</sup> — above all, by ideological discourse, as we shall soon see more clearly.

Mark Lipovetsky and Sven Spieker suggest that

[i]n his texts, Sorokin presents violence as a distinctly cultural phenomenon inseparable from authoritative discourse. Overt depiction of violence in his works serves to make the concealed violence of the authoritative discourses explicit.<sup>36</sup>

It may be correct to argue with Lipovetsky and Spieker that in Sorokin's works the violence implicit in earlier classical and socialist realist writers

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<sup>35</sup>Viacheslav Ivanov had argued that a number of works by Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot* and *Brothers Karamazov*, were informed by the oldest Russian ideas of the unity of humanity, nature and God, embodied in the feminine principle of the living Mother Earth against which man, through his sin and guilt, revolts, and whom he must consequently appease for redemption (*Freedom and the Tragic Life*, pp. 41–45, 70–85).

<sup>36</sup>Mark Lipovetsky and Sven Spieker, 'The Imprints of Terror: The Rhetoric of Violence and the Violence of Rhetoric in Modern Russian Culture', *Wiener Slawistischer Almanach*, 64 (2006), 5–35 (p. 30); cf. Kuritsyn, *Russkii literaturnyi postmodernizm* (Moscow: OGI, 2000), pp. 96–97.



makes itself explicit; however, there are certain reservations that need to be made on this account. One might object, for example, that the violence that exists in the classics is simply a representation of violence that the writers either engaged with critically or that was embedded in the cultural and historical reality of their day. Moreover, more often than not such portrayals of violence are mitigated by implied authorial intention, as is the case in *The Brothers Karamazov* and *Crime and Punishment*, for example. The violence inherent in Raskol'nikov's or Petr Stepanovich Verkhovenski's attitudes and actions exists against the background of open, sincere and dialogical engagement with the discourses, philosophies and viewpoints of other people. Rowan Williams has argued that Dostoevsky's fiction 'deprives itself of the right to close down imaginative possibilities, in obliging itself to confront the most extreme stresses to which belief can be exposed, in simply giving imaginative space for the continued exchanges of real mutual difference'.<sup>37</sup> So the discourses of such classic works of literature are not in themselves at all violent or totalitarian; rather, the contrary is the case.

There are nonetheless instances in Dostoevsky's works, and also in that of Pushkin, Turgenev, Tolstoy, Saltykov-Shchedrin, Maiakovskii, Zamiatin, Solzhenitsyn and Grossman, for example, where 'moral masochism' à la Rancour-Laferrriere is depicted as containing the roots for potential violence and abuse,<sup>38</sup> and not necessarily always subject to disapproval from the implied authorial position. Among Dostoevsky's leading characters, such 'moral masochism' is exhibited in abundance: Dmitrii Karamazov, Prince Myshkin and Nastasia Filippovna and Stavrogin as well as Semen Marmeladov from *Crime and Punishment* and Aleksei Ivanovich from *The Gambler*, all rea-

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<sup>37</sup>Williams, p. 242.

<sup>38</sup>See Chapter 6, Section 3 for a discussion of 'moral masochism'.

son and act masochistically, sometimes to the point even of suicide, as in Stavrogin's case.<sup>39</sup> The implied authorial view of such masochism, while occasionally disapproving (cf. Nastasia Filippovna's relationship with Rogozhin, and the suicides of Kirillov and Stavrogin), is more often ambivalent or even approving: Tikhon encourages Stavrogin to walk the path of humiliation, and Myshkin is viewed as a positive, blessed figure overall. Edward Wasiolek has written:

[t]he Dostoevskian hero not only pays back for the hurt he suffers, but he looks for hurt to suffer [...] He has a stake in being hurt: he seeks it, pursues it, and needs it.<sup>40</sup>

Sorokin assumes the violence of any discourse, and even where, as for example in Dostoevsky's works, violence is generally not approved of, it is nevertheless present implicitly: the 'moral masochism' that according to Rancour-Laferriere has been deeply ingrained in the Russian people, has facilitated the abuse of power on the part of the mighty. Sorokin's grotesque strategy of realising the violent potential of language might be seen as symbolic of the absurdity of ideology, a moral dereliction which is held to account by Sorokin.<sup>41</sup> In this connection, then, it may be worth considering Linda Hutcheon's suggestion that literalisation, the syntagmatic enactment of a figure of speech, for example, can, like exaggeration, have a structurally ironic function as well as a meta-ironic one.<sup>42</sup> Perhaps this suggests to the

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<sup>39</sup>Rancour-Laferriere, pp. 78–92.

<sup>40</sup>Edward Wasiolek, *Dostoevsky: The Major Fiction* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1964), p. 54.

<sup>41</sup>Sorokin's novels *Four Stout Hearts* (*Serdtsa chetyrekh*) (1994) and *Roman* (*Novel*) (1994) follow the same strategy of enacting metaphors. See also Sokolov, pp. 24–26, and Christine Engel, 'Sorokin im Kontext der russischen Postmoderne: Probleme der Wirklichkeitskonstruktion', *Wiener Slavistisches Jahrbuch*, 43 (1997), 53–66.

<sup>42</sup>Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge*, pp. 156–158.

reader that Sorokin's plotlines are not to be taken at face value, since they may simultaneously defamiliarise certain cultural dynamics which the implied author views as being deeply problematic. A further example of such literalisation might be cited, this time taken from Sorokin's novel *The Standard (Norma)* (1994). The standardised bar of processed and compressed faeces is supposedly a compulsory part of the diet of Soviet citizens, a fictional detail that is metaphorically meant to foreground the implied author's perception of the omnipresence of Soviet ideology as a species of rubbish that the people were forced to consume regularly. It is a physical enactment of the mental experience of ideological indoctrination, thereby carnivalistically deconstructing the latter. As Lipovetsky writes, for Sorokin, 'any authoritative discourse is potentially absurd, for the very goal of power over consciousness is itself absurd.'<sup>43</sup> Both Sorokin and Tuchkov foreground such implicit potential for violence and abuse. Sorokin's approach to violence may be accepted as sincere, albeit as pronouncedly subjective.

## 5.3 Typological Considerations

### 5.3.1 Surrealism

As has already been indicated, in Sorokin's fiction there is often no logical connection in the plot between cause and effect. Nevertheless, the novel *The Blue Fat* can be read and the plot be understood in a certain way. However, the reader inescapably asks himself: what is the point? The story is essentially meaningless, at least at the conventional level of deriving meanings from a literary text, i.e. analysis of narration, plot and perspectives. However, it can be argued that the novel's meaninglessness itself is the very

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<sup>43</sup>Lipovetsky, *Dialogue with Chaos*, p. 207.

message, or at least a constitutive part of it. The lack of comprehensibility and meaning is a way of poetically connoting and *suggesting*, of making the reader feel, more than rationally understand, the implied experience of the world as being incomprehensible and meaningless. We may illustrate the theme of this subsection with a quotation of Aleksandr Genis in which he attempts to sum up Sorokin's absurdity by linking it to a surreal nightmare:

reading *The Blue Fat* is like seeing someone else's dream. One should not expect from him consistency and narrative logic [...] The book's senseless, purely dreamlike generosity ties the redundant and superfluous contents together. The unnecessary replaces the essential here. We know everything apart from what we need to know.<sup>44</sup>

And indeed, there is evidence that Sorokin's style is influenced by surrealist poetics. Let us look again at the intra-diegesis 'The Swimming Competition'. It was seemingly narrated by a little hand of gold appearing in the master's hands and 'telling' the story, which the master then wrote down and gave to Savelii to read. In actual fact, the narrative here is very close to a scene in Buñuel and Dalí's film *A Dog from Andalusia* (*Un chien andalou*) (1929), where a hole appears in a character's palm and subsequently, ants come crawling out of it. Even though the precise details in Sorokin's description are slightly different, his scene appears to have been informed by Dalí's film. Now, surrealist art and film were marked by interrogations of, and obsessions with, the cultural fabric and its fragmentation, with sexuality, insanity and death. The structural strategy was to challenge the audience to a point of extremity by creating 'raw tension'; surrealist film is an 'image

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<sup>44</sup>Genis, *Ivan Petrovich umer*, p. 79 (own translation).

which arrived at that potential to act upon its audience as an assault on representation'.<sup>45</sup> Luis Buñuel's son Juan-Luis Buñuel points to the shocking and scandalous nature and arrangement of surrealist art in general and the structure of this film in particular, where a priest and a prostitute are juxtaposed, for example, or where an eyeball is slit open and its content spills out. André Breton said that 'the simplest surrealist act consists of dashing down into the street, pistol in hand, and firing blindly [...]'.<sup>46</sup> The essence of what is represented in surrealism, therefore, seems to be pointlessness, if not absurdity: there can be no sense in it. Referring to *A Dog from Andalusia*, Juan-Luis Buñuel said that 'all symbolic interpretation is completely false [...] [the film was] not to have any symbolic interpretations possible, [but was to be] like a dream, completely irrational'.<sup>47</sup> There seems little doubt that surrealist art and film techniques have influenced Sorokin and this novel;<sup>48</sup> therefore, the structural meaning of such passages might indeed be one of questioning traditional methods of representing the world. Luis Buñuel himself criticised the discussion of artistic form and the search for aesthetic principles in his film by referring to such critics as 'that crowd which has tried to call "beautiful" and "poetic" something which is basically nothing but a desperate cry for murder'.<sup>49</sup> Despite the meaninglessness of the film, it still had a message: it reflected the sense of alienation from the

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<sup>45</sup>Stephen Barber, 'Comments', *Un chien andalou* (1929), directed by Luis Buñuel, screenplay by Salvador Dalí and Luis Buñuel, interview with Juan-Luis Buñuel (Transflux Films, 2004).

<sup>46</sup>Juan-Luis Buñuel, 'Comments', *Un chien andalou*, (1929).

<sup>47</sup>Juan-Luis Buñuel, *ibid.*

<sup>48</sup>The 2006 film *4*, directed by Il'ia Khzhranovskii, for which Sorokin wrote the screenplay, would be another good example of the influence of surrealism on Sorokin's work.

<sup>49</sup>Cited by Hendrik Roelof Rookmaker, *The Creative Gift: The Arts and the Christian Life* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1981), p. 88.

world which Buñuel ascribed to human existence. Even though a piece of art (such as, *A Dog from Andalusia* or *The Blue Fat*) may not be fully intelligible in itself, the reader is still overwhelmed by its general message which confronts deep questions regarding the human condition.

### 5.3.2 Gnosticism

Apart from a general sense of absurdity and meaninglessness, there appears to be a recognisable, underlying and even esoteric ‘message’ in Sorokin’s fiction, namely, a strong current of gnosticism. Etymologically, *gnosis*, like *episteme*, is a Greek word for knowledge.<sup>50</sup> While gnosticism is a philosophical and theological position that has evolved over time and that has manifested itself differently in different times and contexts, and is hence conceptualised differently, we may for our limited purposes here apply it to the conviction that man’s earthly life is contemptible as such, a kind of prison that must be escaped, which requires the attainment of higher knowledge to such an end.<sup>51</sup> Gnosticism obviously contains an element of alienation from society, which can be overcome by the attainment of *gnosis*; the *OED* defines the concept

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<sup>50</sup>Liddell and Scott’s *Greek-English Lexicon* render γνῶσις (*gnosis*) as ‘seeking to know, inquiry, investigation, esp. judicial’ as well as ‘knowing, knowledge’, ‘higher, esoteric knowledge’ and ‘acquaintance with a person’ (p. 355); ἐπιστήμη (*episteme*), on the other hand, is translated as ‘acquaintance with a matter, understanding, skill, as in archery’, as well as ‘generally, knowledge’ and in particular ‘scientific knowledge, science’ (p. 660). While *gnosis* seems to have been preferred by ancient Greeks to refer to personal, empirical and spiritual knowledge, with *episteme* appearing to have been more likely to be used in terms of practical as well as intellectual knowledge, both largely overlap and ultimately mean the same [Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, Henry Stuart Jones and Roderick McKenzie *et al.*, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966; first published 1843)].

<sup>51</sup>Rookmaker, *The Creative Gift*, p. 95.

as '[a] special knowledge of spiritual mysteries'. The *Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy* identifies the following beliefs as characteristic of gnosticism: the view of the world as an imperfect creation of a lower god; a higher revelation which only 'spiritual' humans, as opposed to 'material' ones, have access to; and salvation as the liberation of the spirit from the bondage of matter. While in ancient Greece *gnosis* was a normal word for knowledge, it came later to signify higher spiritual insight about salvation.<sup>52</sup>

The 'blue fat' has such an esoteric function in the novel, and even more so, the 'ice' in *The Ice (Led)*.<sup>53</sup> There are a number of obvious parallels with *The Blue Fat*, and indeed it has been suggested that *The Blue Fat*, *The Ice* and the subsequent novel *Bro's Way (Put' Bro)* are best seen as a kind of trilogy. There are also major differences, however, such as the fact that, unlike its predecessor, *The Ice* has a linear plot. While there is humour at the level of character interaction and dialogue in *The Ice* (in addition to the usual dose of violence and *russkii mat*), there is no irony at the level of plot which focuses around a sect of twenty-three thousand individuals predestined to achieve salvation for themselves and for creation through the cultivation of the sky-blue 'ice'.

The starting point for an understanding of the plot is the cosmic history that underlies the fictional world of *The Ice*. In the course of the novel, the reader learns that in the world's pre-historic phase, twenty-three thousand 'carriers of light' existed and created stars, planets and galaxies in an otherwise empty universe. Owing to a mistake at creation, cosmic energy was lost, and as consequence, earth turned into hell ('Земля превратилась в ад', p. 211) and gave rise to evil. Thus, the assumption of this novel is that human

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<sup>52</sup>Thomas Mautner, *The Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy* (London, New York, Victoria et al.: Penguin, 2000), p. 223.

<sup>53</sup>Vladimir Sorokin, *Led* (Moscow: Ad Marginem, 2002).

history began with man's fall from an initially perfect state to one instinct with evil. There is no evidence of irony that would suggest that this aspect of the fiction is not to be taken seriously. Returning to the plot: the explosion of the meteorite over Tunguska river in the Krasnoiarsk region in the year 1908 provided a means of redemption. In 1927, the cosmic powers intrinsic to the meteorite's ice are discovered by a blue-eyed, fair-haired Russian student visiting Siberia, who becomes founder of the sect of 'light bearers'. The sect spreads in a limited way, gaining members in Germany and among the SS as well as in the Soviet Union. Even though a given member may be unaware of his calling, his membership can be detected by an already existing member who then strikes him with a hammer made of the cosmic ice, an action which awakes the sectarian inside and causes him to speak in the 'language of the heart'. This may sound like an activation of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's famous philosophy in *Le Petit Prince* that '*on ne voit bien qu'avec le cœur. L'essentiel est invisible pour les yeux*'. More important here might be the gnostic connection: 'insight' concerning salvation facilitated by understanding of the spiritual nature of the cosmos. Those characters in *The Ice* who undergo such treatment and who do not respond are considered to be 'deaf', living corpses, not real men, but rather 'meat machines' and die from the blows of the hammer. During World War II and the Purges many sectarians perished, but some were miraculously saved, sometimes by what would ordinarily have been enemy German SS officers. The sect is not interested in political and ethnic differences, however, only in the difference between knowing or being ignorant of 'spiritual' or 'cosmic' truth. By the sixties, the sect has come together again, penetrated the country's political echelons and managed to produce 'ice' from the meteorite by using the work force of a correction camp in Siberia. In subsequent decades, the sectarians



begin a campaign to restore the original membership of 23,000 by kidnapping people, ‘hammering’ them and hopefully ‘awakening’ a new member, however many of the ‘deaf’ perish in the process, of course. With the collapse of the USSR the substance is freely sold and marketed in post-Soviet Russia, with a considerable increase in the number of ‘bearers of light’. As with the end of *The Blue Fat*, where a young man finds ‘blue fat’ and does not know what it is, a young boy in *The Ice* comes upon a piece of ‘ice’ and plays with it, while having no idea of its nature.

Without venturing into a full discussion of the reception and interpretation of this novel, it is worth emphasising two points for our present purposes: gnosticism and the typically modernist frustration with bourgeois life as central to the author’s underlying philosophy of man and the world. Concerning the view of man embodied in the novel, we have already pointed out connections with gnosticism which cannot be accidental. Earlier we hinted at the possibility that Sorokin’s works contain evidence of a metaphysical quest. Sorokin said in an interview:

Life — including our bodily life — in general seems to me a heavy thing. [...] I understand that life’s a kind of camp [...] and we’ve received a certain sentence to live in it. Why, what for, is not a question that’s generally asked, it’s considered inappropriate. All you can do is sit out your sentence honourably [...] which means also trying to remain a person, not sinking to the level of swine. But at the same time I don’t respect this camp, which consists not just of this country and the relations among people here, but of the body itself, the body which subjects us to so much dependence and torment. So in that sense, no, I don’t respect the body [...] but I don’t despise human beings. I understand man’s

weakness and his lack of freedom. [...] Almost all my novels can be seen as descriptions of a search for an exit; they are all in some way about the salvation of their heroes. [...] I'm genuinely concerned with the idea of salvation, as the nineteenth-century writers were [...]<sup>54</sup>

Of course, Sorokin's negative view of the embodied nature of humanity is diametrically opposed to how most postmodern thinkers view the body. One of postmodernism's abiding interests is in the restoration of the bodily dimension of man after the latter had supposedly been reduced in the wake of Descartes to cognition, to 'thinking man' much to the detriment and repression of the flesh. In this regard Sorokin's philosophy is clearly not postmodern, but rather esoteric and spiritual. Furthermore, if gnosticism is as important an element as appears, it lays emphasis on the search for knowledge, epistemology rather than ontology, even if the latter appears to be foregrounded at the level of form.

The second point awaiting elucidation is that of frustration with bourgeois life, which is certainly shared with Buñuel's surrealism, for example. 'Bourgeois' here is not used in a socio-political or Marxist sense, but rather in the sense of what is called the 'normal life', spent in the pursuit of security, materialism, personal peace, comfort and ease, one that avoids posing transcendent questions. In *The Ice*, the sect's elder, Bro, says of the non-sectarians who do not participate in 'real life' as the former do:

они живые трупы. Абсолютное большинство людей на нашей земле рождаются мертвыми, женятся на мертвых, рожают мертвых, умирают; их мертвые дети рожают новых мертвецов, — и так из века в век (p. 205.)

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<sup>54</sup>Laird, pp. 155, 160.

These words by the protagonist Bro, presumably spoken with the authority of the implied author, appears to express a longing for true humanity and meaning.

## 5.4 Conclusions

The reader has been confronted with Sorokin's philosophy, his view of man and of literature, and we have seen that, in these respects, Sorokin is very much related to modernism, seeing literature and the pre-existing tradition as an avenue for transcending the limitations of the human condition. A central feature of gnosticism is the pursuit of ultimate truth and knowledge, whereas rejecting the notion of the existence or attainability of such overarching truth is a core concern of postmodernism. Given that Sorokin's writing seems to be influenced by some features of gnosticism, this fact would remove him from postmodernism in important regards and place him in the typological vicinity of Russian modernism, even though his implicit experience of man as a heteronomous machine devoid of wider significance is certainly shared by postmodernism. Also, the nature of pastiche, parody, humour and therapy in his works has been examined, and considered as specific means to specific ends, namely to write metaphorically about how he, Sorokin, views the world and man, history and ideology, language and literature; as mentioned earlier, perhaps the best and most accurate way of relating to his works is to see them as a scream of anguish both about (his) humanity as such, as well as more specifically about the Soviet past and Russian culture. The fragmentation of the world which the implied author seems to experience is expressed through the very fragmented, one might say modernist-cum-postmodern, nature of the novel's composition. The form *is* the message,

as it were. However, the implied author's craving for a universal, higher truth, as discussed, in addition to his frustration with rationalism and the resulting lack of meaning and autonomy in a world without moral grid, in an absurd existence that is paradoxically marked by determinism and chance at the same time, would justify locating him in the tradition of Dostoevsky and, in particular, the modernists Zamiatin and Kharms. His concern for individual man's freedom in a social sense, freedom from abuse and ideological manipulation, as distinct from his concern for mankind's autonomy in the philosophical sense, also reflect certain aspects that figure prominently in Dostoevsky and Kharms. Lipovetsky argues that in Sorokin's *œuvre*, 'post-Communism/postmodernism emerge as an integrated cultural project'.<sup>55</sup> If his reference to 'postmodernism' is seen mainly as a matter of form, and as one of continuing modernism,<sup>56</sup> one might agree: against the background of the repository of the Russian literary tradition, Sorokin's fiction engages simultaneously with both the fragmented condition of modern man, and the visceral experience of Soviet ideology, while pursuing an esoteric quest for meaning beyond the embodied world. Hence, he may well be best conceptualised as a contemporary Russian 'neo-modernist'.

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<sup>55</sup>Lipovetsky, 'Russian Literary Postmodernism in the 1990s', p. 49.

<sup>56</sup>Cf. Lipovetsky, *Paralogii*, pp. XXVI–XXVIII, and 'Russian Literary Postmodernism in the 1990s', p. 44.

## Chapter 6

# The ‘Aesopian’: Vladimir Tuchkov

*So you destroy everything. . . But one must construct too, you know.*<sup>1</sup>

— Nikolai Kirsanov to Bazarov, in Turgenev’s *Fathers and Children*

The present work aspires to contribute to our understanding of post-Soviet Russian fiction. The approach followed throughout is one of pursuing a less well-trodden path, namely that of an investigation into the subterranean philosophical continuities with the humanist, spiritual and social concerns of Russia’s literary tradition. Our chosen exemplars of post-Soviet Russian literature seem to demonstrate implicitly such typological closeness, for all their ‘postmodern’ play with the texts and signs of Russian and Soviet culture. Earlier, we offered arguments that illustrated why it may be of benefit to regard even the works by Sorokin, surely one of the most outstanding and widely discussed figures in the post-Soviet Russian ‘postmodern’ canon, as ‘neo-modernist’. There are other contemporary writers, like

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<sup>1</sup>*The Novels of Ivan Turgenev: Illustrated Edition. Fathers and Children*, trans. by Constance Garnett (London: Heinemann; New York: Macmillan, 1906), p. 84.

Vladimir Tuchkov and Aleksandr Khurgin, however, whose works have attracted significantly less scholarly attention and in this sense may be regarded as ‘non-canonical’.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, analysis of their works will be offered in this chapter and in the next that will validate our general thesis, as well as providing specific new insights.

Vladimir Tuchkov’s fiction, like that of Sorokin, is characterised by features that are generally taken to be an expression of postmodern poetics, features we have discussed at length in Chapter 4, like parody and stylisation, intertextual play and self-referentiality, on the one hand, and gruesome plots lacking overt intervention from the implied author, on the other. The abuse and violence that abound in Tuchkov’s short diegeses leave the reader perplexed, since often the narratives offer no immediately recognisable moral judgement through plot development and perspective, something with which one would be familiar from the works by Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, to name the two writers who figure most prominently in Tuchkov’s fiction. However, Tuchkov’s works are pregnant with meaning that can easily be overlooked, as this chapter will demonstrate. As was the case with modernist writers, and also with Sorokin and Tolstaia, Tuchkov’s creativity is strongly influenced by the desire to draw on, and relate to, the accumulated treasures of Russian literature. Tuchkov’s narratives, reflecting the realities of post-Soviet Russia, incarnate a pervasive confusion of values. His engagement with the classics, parodic as it may seem, is, however, ultimately aimed at highlighting both the absurdity and meaninglessness of a world without a functioning grid of values. Tuchkov follows a dialectical approach, perhaps not unlike the medi-

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<sup>2</sup>Galina Dursthoff [Durstkhoff], however, includes both writers, whom she characterises as postmodern, in her Russian and German anthologies of contemporary Russian prose [*Rußland: 21 neue Erzähler* (Munich: dtv, 2003); p. 279; *Sovremennaia russkaia proza: 22 rasskaza* (Moscow: Zakharov, 2003)].

aeval *iurodivye*: his use of humour, satire and the grotesque help the reader to grasp that his narrative worlds aim at showing what post-Soviet men and women *ought* to be like — by doing the opposite, namely portraying them as they *are*. Tuchkov may be seen neo-modernist in that he, like the Russian modernists, perceives the need to address an all-permeating loss of meaning and understanding that accompanied a period of cataclysmic change; he looks back to Russia's cultural heritage to do so, offering his people the best of 'Mother Russia's own milk', to employ Men'shikov's metaphor once more.

Before beginning the discussion proper of works by Tuchkov, let us note that what little scholarly interest his short fiction has awoken, has focussed on an aspect that Tuchkov's poetics share with that of Sorokin, namely the creation of a quasi-mythological space where pre-modern, Soviet and post-Soviet times converge.<sup>3</sup> The elements of anti-utopia, parody of the 'new Russians', the supremacy of self-will and 'moral masochism' in Tuchkov's fictions will be explored in this context, pointing to semantic perspectives created through humour and *skaz* narration. The discussion will focus mainly on Tuchkov's four major cycles or sets of stories *And He Earned Many Dollars...* (*I zarabotal mnogo dollarov...*) (which itself consists of three individual cycles),<sup>4</sup> *Those Singing in the Internet* (*Poiushchie v Internete*)<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Mark Lipovetsky, 'New Russians as Cultural Myth', *The Russian Review*, 62 (2003), 54–71; Kapitolina Koksheneva, *Revoliutsiia nizkikh smyslov: o sovremennoi russkoi proze* (Moscow: Leto, 2001), pp. 109–113.

<sup>4</sup>Vladimir Tuchkov, *I zarabotal mnogo dollarov...: novye russkie skazki* (Moscow: NLO, 2005).

<sup>5</sup>Vladimir Tuchkov, *Poiushchie v Internete: skazki dlia vzroslykh. Odinnadtsat' zhizneopisanii novykh russkikh bankirov, terzaemykh rokovymi strastiami* (Moscow: Zakharov, 2002).

and *Death Comes through the Internet* (*Smert' prikhodit po Internetu*),<sup>6</sup> and *The Last Kidney* (*Posledniaia pochka*).<sup>7</sup> The presentation of our discussion has been structured so as to enable us to discuss in a focussed way the major features of Tuchkov's short fiction — intertextuality and pastiche, parody and metafiction, and his thematic concern with freedom, utopia and 'moral masochism'. Each of these discussions will therefore focus on a specific set of stories that best illustrate the points made. However, all these elements permeate Tuchkov's short prose, albeit with variations in execution and density.

## 6.1 Intertextuality and Pastiche

Intertextuality, whether at first glance parodic or not, pervades Tuchkov's short fiction. However, in certain of his works it appears to play a much more central role than in others. Tuchkov's three cycles of stories *And He Earned Many Dollars...* (*I zarabotal mnogo dollarov...*), to which we shall now turn, probably reflects the highest degree of intertextuality and pastiche. This is the case because pastiche and intertextual references operate at various levels: at that of pastiche of a particular literary work, that of pastiche of style and genre, and at that of numerous direct and indirect quotations from Russian and world literature.

*And He Earned Many Dollars...: New Russian Fairy-Tales* is a collection of three cycles containing 163 short comic stories in total, published in 1992, 1998 and 2004, the major theme of which are the peculiarities and pathologies

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<sup>6</sup>Vladimir Tuchkov, *Smert' prikhodit po Internetu: opisaniye odinnadtsati beznakazannykh prestuplenii, kotorye byli taino soversheny v domakh novykh russkikh bankirov* (Moscow: NLO, 2001).

<sup>7</sup>Vladimir Tuchkov, *Posledniaia pochka: rasskazy* (Moscow: Limbus, 2008).



of post-Soviet Russian society. Most of these stories are pastiches of Lev Tolstoy's four cycles of didactic stories (*Russkie knigi dlia chteniia*), written between 1875 and 1885, as well as of other works by Tolstoy and certain other writers. Tolstoy's stories, fables and fairy-tales were written for the children of peasants, and covered themes, and motifs drawn from nature, plant and animal life, as well as history, geography and ethnology. They were aimed at teaching primary school children the basics of nature, society and peasant life.

For his part, Tuchkov exchanges the content or background of elementary *narodo- i estestvovedenie* for motifs and myths concerning post-Soviet existence. Thematically, the three cycles broadly correspond to the three 'periods' of post-Soviet Russian society and politics, beginning with the early post-Perestroika years, with their new degree of political and economic freedom, political chaos, and the rush to make money. The second period could be described in terms of the further erosion of the Kremlin's power *vis-à-vis* society, the regions and other influential institutions, thrown into relief by a weakening and alcoholic president and all manner of constitutional disputes. This period was also characterised by radical economic reform and financial instability and witnessed the rise of the so-called 'oligarchs'. The third period was and is marked by the restoration of state power generally and the Kremlin's position in particular, to the possible detriment of civil society and other state or constitutional authorities, such as the *Duma*. This was accompanied by the immense personal popularity of the president, significant economic improvement, as well as Kremlin action to neutralise the influence of the 'oligarchs'. Against this background, Tuchkov embodies and parodies the attitude of the people toward politics and various actants on the political scene, like the president, the government and the *Duma*, as well as charac-

terising ‘oligarchs’, bankers, business-people and clergy, many of whom are portrayed as tricksters, simpletons and fools.

In the introductory section to the three *Knigi dlia chteniia*, Tuchkov identifies himself as a *raznochinets*. Since the time of Catherine II, Russian imperial society had been marked by a mismatch between social status and social function, owing to the absence of a genuine civil society. Many people who had enjoyed education no longer fitted into their original social category, and had no easy access to another. Such people of ‘sundry rank’ were called *raznochintsy*. The officially non-existent class of *raznochintsy* later became a breeding ground for the radical intelligentsia with their particular desire to learn from the ‘simple’ people and to bring culture and education to them, in their turn. In their general desire to see an improvement of social conditions they, therefore, possessed a critical attitude towards the regime.<sup>8</sup> Tuchkov’s narrator thereby seems to identify himself with this historical category of people and presumably their general ideas, and with their status as standing outside of society. He laments the fact that in the Russia of his days ‘это самое общество двинулось вспять времен’ (p. 8), suggesting that Russian society has regressed rather than progressed.

The socio-political regressive movement observed by Tuchkov, which is also a major mark of his ‘Internet’ stories (see pp. 243 ff.), is highlighted by the subtitle, or rather dedication of his 2004 cycle of stories: ‘Посвящается строителям светлого прошлого’ (p. 9). The fact that Tuchkov replaced the word ‘future’ with ‘past’ in this utopian dedication reveals his humorous intention to unmask those who claim to be building a better system or future and yet who are actually moving Russia backwards. An important implication of Tuchkov’s drawing on the Russian classics as intertextual framework

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<sup>8</sup>Hosking, pp. 263–264.

for the analysis of contemporary society is that these classic works, in fact, constitute pivotal reference points for post-Soviet Russian society with its oft mourned loss of cultural, ideological and moral values. As it seems, the cycle's dedication also affirms the continuing validity of the Russian notion of the writer as performing a task that is critical to society.

In his dryly humorous preface, Tuchkov explicitly puts his stories into the tradition of Tolstoy's *Russkie knigi dlia chteniia*.<sup>9</sup> More precisely, he states his intention to continue Tolstoy's efforts to 'наставить народ на путь истинный' (p. 7), that is to improve the spiritual lot of the Russian people and to teach such virtues as kindness, honesty, love of work, thirst for knowledge and sobriety, as the *raison d'être* for his *Russkie knigi dlia chteniia*. Ironically, Tuchkov's narrator describes such efforts by Tolstoy as having 'failed'.

Tuchkov, by virtue of copying Tolstoy's use of the Aesopian genre, which by definition has a didactic and critical, often satirical nature, engages with post-Soviet society in an entertaining, pedagogical way. He claims the purpose of his stories to be the education of Russians on how to make money in the 1992 cycle (to be taken ironically), to fight for social order and justice in 1998, and to fight against a retrogressive socio-political development in the 2004 stories; his pieces are indeed critical of social and political reality. Tuchkov uses a set of genre-specifications as subtitles to the stories largely similar to those of Tolstoy (e.g. *Byl'*, *Allegoriia*, *Chistaia Pravda*) and organises these stories along the lines of classical fable structure,<sup>10</sup> and occasionally

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<sup>9</sup>Cf. L. N. Tolstoi, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii. Seriia pervaiia. Proizvedeniia*, ed. by V. G. Chertkov. *Tom 21. Novaia Azbuka i Russkie knigi dlia chteniia (1874–1875)* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1957), xxi.

<sup>10</sup>For example, the President becomes aware of corruption (situation), orders his government to fight it (action), the ministers fight with each other (reaction), 'real' corruption

places the drama in the animal kingdom (or sometimes the human world is confronted with anthropomorphised animals). This enables him to both historicise and defamiliarise contemporary society by creating quasi-historical and quasi-fantastical realms. The quasi-mythological nature of the narrative world of his stories is achieved by the simplification of complex contemporary societal structures. Tuchkov creates representative types or myths of a group or collective of specific social actors: *narod*, *individuum*, *biznesmen*, *bankir*, *oligarkhi*, *reformer*, *deputaty* and so on. This, in conjunction with his use of old-fashioned or inappropriate language (*muzhik*, *Rus'*, *kremlevskii mudrets*, *sukiny deti*, *kobyłka*, *blevat'*), enables him to evoke the sense of historical remoteness of a fairy-tale kingdom in some pre-enlightened, quasi-absolutist age that is often associated with the genres of fairy-tale, fable and saga. This historical relocation, created both by the use of Tolstoy's generic formulations and by stylising the characters, is ironically confirmed by Tuchkov himself, who says of his *Russkie knigi dlia chteniia*: 'Возникли проблемы и с возрастной идентификацией. [...] Читатели «Русских книг для чтения» изумляются, когда узнают, что их автор все еще жив. ...'<sup>11</sup>

Let us look briefly at two themes that characterise many of the stories by Tuchkov: that of early post-Soviet enthusiasm with capitalism and that of adoration for, and unquestioning submission to, the political leader and the government. 'The Bank is Dollars' ('Bank — dollary') (p. 202), appeared in the 1992 cycle 'Piataia russkaia kniga dlia chteniia'. The everyday workings of nature, such as biological life and growth, are highlighted by showing the differences between winter, a time when everything appears dead, and summer, with its visible abundance of life:

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continues to flourish (result) [v. 'Kak nado borot'sia s korruptsiei (Razdum'e)', p. 34].

<sup>11</sup>Vladimir Tuchkov, 'Ia', in Durstkhoff, *Sovremennaia russkaia proza*, p. 278.

Посмотри летом: реки бегут, шумят; в каждой лужице лягушки кричат, бубулькают; птицы перелетывают, свистят, поют; мухи, комары вьются, жужжат; деревья, травы растут, махаются (р. 202).

The effect of the sun is then compared with that of banks, money and dollars, however:

То же делается на свете от долларов. Нет долларов — все мертво; есть доллары — все движется и живет. Мало долларов — мало движенья; больше долларов — больше движенья; много долларов — много движенья; очень много долларов — и очень много движенья.

Consequently, the ‘refrain’ in this story is: ‘Кто все это сделал? Банк.’ The story ends on the word ‘Аминь’, which, of course, belongs to the language of prayer, and which therefore, in the context of the story, hyberbolically implies the worship of Mammon. The story provides a fictionally exaggerated representation of the pursuit and worship of wealth and material values, as embodied in ‘new Russians’ generally and oligarchs, in particular. Materialism and the ‘new Russians’ will also be the major theme in Tuchkov’s two ‘Internet’ cycles, to be discussed in the following section.

Whereas the above story embodies the post-Soviet faith in capitalism, our next fairy-tale comically portrays the adoration of the president, and the relationship of the individual and society. As in ‘The Bank is Dollars’, the story entitled ‘Movement (Discussion)’ (‘Dvizhenie (Rassuzhdenie)’ (2004) (р. 28) adopts as its pattern Tolstoy’s ‘The Sun is Warm (Discussion)’ (‘Solntse — teplo (Rassuzhdenie)’),<sup>12</sup> a story which, as well as depicting a number

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<sup>12</sup>Tolstoi, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii. Proizvedeniia. Tom 21*, pp. 298–299.

of observations and an excursus on nature, also relates the author's conclusion about how much natural life, movement and growth are dependent on warmth from the sun. Each of Tolstoy's paragraphs ends on some variation of the question: 'Кто это сделал?' and its answer: 'Солнце.' Tuchkov in his pastiche uses almost the same text, with the same experiments and the same observations, but replaces the rhetorical question about the sun as the originator of all life with the Kremlin. The story portrays the president, the Kremlin in general and their cohorts in parliament as an all-powerful, all-permeating, super-human and indispensable natural force, that with intelligence sustains all life. However, by describing the Kremlin as the ultimate reason for grass to grow and the rain to fall, Tuchkov ridicules the implied presumptuousness and power-hunger of the Kremlin, as well as the implicit unreflecting, childlike faith of the people in the president, and the Kremlin's official justifications for the far-reaching power that it claims for itself. The wording 'лично товарищ Президент' is particularly revealing, since the adverb 'лично' refers to a cult of personality and the noun 'Президент' to the country's most powerful political institution, whereas the word 'товарищ' implies proximity and comradeship with the people, while portraying the continuity of the role of tsar or CPSU chairman in a post-Soviet president. Beneath the hyperbolic and satirical character of this story, Tuchkov shows an acute understanding of social reality.

At first sight, Tuchkov's relationship with the literary tradition seems to be a superficial, playful and contemptuous one, which, in the eyes of many, would justify the label 'postmodern'. Indeed, his pastiche of Tolstoy's *Knig dlia chteniia* has a comical character, which operates through the transposition of Tolstoy's language and themes into a historically alien context, thereby creating incongruity between the narrative world of Tolstoy and that

of Tuchkov. Nevertheless, the semantic intention in these cycles, as shown above, does not seem to oppose that in Tolstoy's homonymous work. On the contrary, even though Tuchkov's hyperbolic fables are humour-filled and light-footed,<sup>13</sup> whereas many of Tolstoy's are more obviously didactic, the implicit social criticism in Tuchkov's *Knigi dlia chteniia* is ultimately rooted in a related traditional moral concern for society. What the adaptation of Tolstoy's work by Tuchkov presupposes is an appreciative engagement with Tolstoy's works, an open acknowledgement of its being a central source of inspiration and of critical importance to the world in which the author lives. The implicit role of Tolstoy, and with him that of a whole range of further classical writers in Tuchkov's work, may therefore truly be viewed as 'ruins of glory'.

## 6.2 Anti-utopia and the Logic of Power

Let us now turn to another central feature in Tuchkov's work: the themes of freedom and utopia, or, rather the lack of the former, and the psychology of power and exploitation that can be associated with the realisation of the latter. It is suggested that Tuchkov's short fictions reveal a profound concern for freedom, for all that they contain biting grotesque, satire and parody which help bring to the fore the inherently abusive nature of violent revolution. As will become clearer in due course, Tuchkov seems to stand thematically in the Russian tradition of anti-utopia as manifest in Dostoevsky and Zamiatin, for example. This is not to say that his works employ similar fictional strategies, such as Dostoevsky's sophisticated polyphonic and dialogical construction of

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<sup>13</sup>In this regard, they can be viewed as being related to the genre of post-Soviet political *anekdoty*; for a discussion of post-Soviet political humour, see Seth Graham, *Resonant Dissonance*, pp. 126–140.

perspectives, or the kind of irony and character development which are the hallmarks of Zamiatin's *We*, for example. By contrast, Tuchkov's short prose often lacks any comparable narrative depth, which, of course, may also be conditioned by the fact that the works examined are short works, rather than novels. Nevertheless, the brevity of his stories is not intended to explain away the fact that Tuchkov's characters are mainly 'puppets', who occasionally exhibit psychological development, and are always subject to humour. Indeed, it is the pronouncedly playful, humorous and exorbitantly grotesque nature of Tuchkov's works that delineates him most clearly from the more serious approaches of his realist and modernist predecessors. Although this may explain why one might be tempted to designate his works as postmodern, we will focus on their underlying, deeper thematic and moral continuities. Moreover, it is typically impossible to recognise the semantic purpose at the level of plot alone; his works require analysis of the overall composition and motif structure, as was the case with some modernist fiction. The three stories to be looked at in this context, 'The Madcap' ('Sumasbrod'), 'The Relentless Call of Blood' ('Besposhchadnyi zov krovi') and 'The Island of Peace and Happiness' ('Ostrov svobody i shchast'ia'), have been selected for this particular discussion since utopia constitutes the parodic reference point of these works more emphatically than in his other stories. Other themes may figure in these two stories too, but for the sake of clarity and focus discussion of them is postponed to subsequent sections.

Let us first consider 'The Madcap' ('Sumasbrod'),<sup>14</sup> a story about a wealthy man called Andrei who erects a luxurious estate in the countryside. Andrei himself never lives on his estate, but instead adopts the pseudonym Nechaev and spends time in the surrounding villages. Nechaev takes an inter-

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<sup>14</sup>Tuchkov, *Poiushchie v Internetе*, pp. 8–17.



est in the lot of the deprived people and teaches them that they can recover that which has been taken away from them. So the people start to talk about killing the wealthy and beginning a revolution. Nechaev encourages the idea of armed struggle, which results in the formation of a 'облреввоенсовет' (p. 11), a regional revolutionary military council. A fortnight is spent in combat training, before Nechaev singles out a certain affluent estate (which is his own) as the ideal object of revolutionary, anti-bourgeois hatred. The 'peasants' 'liberate' the estate, defile the women and torture the staff, while to their disappointment not finding any treasure. They proceed to burn the estate and look for their leader Nechaev, who has vanished. Scared, the insurgents return to their village; the FSB, fearing that the rebellion might spread across the country, fruitlessly conducts an investigation.

In this cruel story, Tuchkov again creates an ahistorical, hyperbolic space that implicitly foregrounds the issue of power and ideology and causes the Soviet and the post-Soviet periods to intermingle with typologically ancient conceptions of power. In effect, Nechaev relates to the population around his estate not even as a lord to his slaves: they are simply objects for the satisfaction of his depraved idea of playing at revolution.<sup>15</sup>

The story of Andrei alias Nechaev resembles a number of other stories in the two cycles with its parody of the megalomaniac and arbitrary ideas and conduct of the 'new Russians'. However, above and beyond that, it thematises the concept of power by parodying the revolutionary thought of the 1870s and of revolutionary movements in general, and also the notion of being able to bring a utopia into existence through force: the existing order is destroyed, property is confiscated and lives are destroyed, while the peasants are losers as much as anyone else. More specifically, Andrei's pseudonym,

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<sup>15</sup>Cf. Koksheneva, pp. 109–113.

Nechaev, relates him to the character Petr Stepanovich Verkhovenskii in Dostoevsky's *The Devils*, since Petr Verkhovenskii was partially modelled on the Russian revolutionary and anarchist Sergei G. Nechaev. According to Billington, Dostoevsky's novel 'caricatured Nechaev's revolutionary conspiracy with unprecedented metaphysical depth and satiric power'<sup>16</sup> and revealed Petr Verkhovenskii's mindset as despotic and totalitarian, in that he uses and sacrifices people like 'pawns on a chessboard'.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, one of Petr Verkhovenskii's activities lay in his agitation amongst the population, awakening the desire for a better life, spreading fire both literally and metaphorically. Tuchkov's Nechaev behaves in the same way: he dehumanises human beings for the sake of what the peasants view as 'just cause'.

The leitmotif of the mob in 'The Madcap', inspired by Nechaev, is: 'Смерть козлам!' (p. 11). Siniavskii-Terts, in his analysis of the peasant and people factor as 'elementary force'<sup>18</sup> in the Russian Revolution, refers to Alesha Karamazov's hushed reply 'Shoot him!' after his brother Ivan Karamazov tells him the story of a certain cruel and abusive General. Siniavskii interprets Alesha's response, which is diametrically opposed to his moral convictions as a monk, as 'the power of instantaneous emotional reaction'.<sup>19</sup> He transposes Alesha Karamazov's reaction into the time of the October Revolution and regards it as representative for many people at the time: '[...] all at once, even the word 'to shoot' acquired an exalted and even romantic mean-

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<sup>16</sup>James Billington, *Fire in the Minds of Men: Origins of the Revolutionary Faith* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2007), p. 339.

<sup>17</sup>The narrator's words in Part 3, Chapter 4, Section II [Dostoevskii, *Sobranie sochinenii. Tom sed'moi. Besy*, p. 574] (own translation).

<sup>18</sup>Andrej Sinjawschij, *Der Traum vom neuen Menschen oder Die Sowjetzivilisation*, trans. by Swetlana Geier (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1998), pp. 25–36 (own translation).

<sup>19</sup>Sinjawschij, p. 30 (own translation).

ing.’<sup>20</sup> Siniavskii also refers to other poets and writers who were enchanted by the ‘sublime’, ‘inspiring’ and ‘righteous’ character of the Revolution, as they perceived it.

As we shall see also in the story ‘The Lord of the Steppe’ (‘Stepnoi barin’), ‘The Madcap’ is about the people’s malleability, their readiness to believe in any self-proclaimed messiah, as well as in social justice in a promised future utopia. This enthusiasm for revolution is what Dostoevsky’s character Andrei Antonovich called ‘fire in the minds’,<sup>21</sup> something that is described in the following way in Versilov’s dream in Dostoevsky’s next novel *A Raw Youth* (1874):

[t]he golden age is the most unlikely of all the dreams that have been, but for it men have given up their life and all their strength, for the sake of it prophets have died and been slain, without it the peoples will not live and cannot die [...]<sup>22</sup>

Let us turn briefly to a further aspect of ‘The Madcap’, its ‘revolutionary logic’, as it were. Once the peasants are in charge of the modern-day estate, they display cruelty and violence: ‘[. . .] чисто интуитивно действовали по законам Средневековья, применявшимся при взятии вражеских городов и укрепленных форпостов’ (p. 12). Siniavskii writes that:

[f]inally, the moral imperative of the Revolution, which justifies every manipulation with one’s own conscience, was transformed into simple conformism and subservience. And the ‘new

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<sup>20</sup>Sinjawskij, p. 30 (own translation).

<sup>21</sup>Part 3, Chapter 2, Section IV of *The Devils* (Dostoevskii, *Sobranie sochinenii. Tom sed'moi. Besy*, p. 538) (own translation).

<sup>22</sup>Fyodor Dostoevsky, *A Raw Youth*, trans. by Constance Garnett (Melbourne, London and Toronto: Heinemann, 1956), p. 462.

man' emerged as an ordinary recipient of orders, as an adjustable slave, as a mechanical executor of an alien decision. . .<sup>23</sup>

Mark Lipovetsky describes Tuchkov's method as a form of 'intellectual model[l]ing', whereby Tuchkov reveals the 'behavio[u]ral codes' that would enable the events of his stories to take place in reality. According to the peculiar logic of the Russian business world, the pursuit of power as a 'totally self-sufficient' end in itself and indeed as a 'religious absolute', the atrocious actions of Tuchkov's 'heroes', are presented by the narrator as perfectly normal and reasonable, and within that subworld's logic are supposedly accepted as such.<sup>24</sup> From the perspective of Nechaev, his horrible actions are perfectly logical and reasonable, and so is the peasants' course of action. From the outsider's, i.e. the reader's perspective, however, the plot is absurd, insofar as the peasant's actions contradict common sense relative to the peasants' real interests. The peasants seem foolish, and Nechaev sick in the mind. The attitude that Tuchkov attributes to this subworld of the 'new Russians', the view of the individual as worthless, was central to some of the revolutionary thinking and action that characterised Russia in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Tuchkov's story points to the desire for power as the behavioural paradigm inherent in revolution, rather than to altruistic interest in bettering the lot of the people.

The next story to be examined, 'The Relentless Call of Blood' ('Besposhchadnyi zov krovi'),<sup>25</sup> parodies the staple motifs of utopian discourse. It concerns Nikolai, a wealthy young man who retires from business to become a surgeon. He buys himself a licence to practise medicine, together with a few surgery textbooks, builds a hospital, forcibly collects homeless people

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<sup>23</sup>Sinjawskij, p. 192 (own translation).

<sup>24</sup>Lipovetsky, 'New Russians as Cultural Myth', pp. 62–63.

<sup>25</sup>Tuchkov, *Poiushchie v Internetе*, pp. 27–37.

whom he uses as raw material to train himself in his new profession. After an initial period of great loss in terms of the number of patients he claims to treat but, in fact, kills, he gradually becomes more proficient. Inspired by old Soviet medical journals from the seventies which reported on a Soviet biologist who managed to sew a second head onto a dog which then survived the operation, Nikolai experiments with the creation of ‘doubloids’ (‘даблориды’), double-headed humans, who all unfortunately die shortly after their operation (pp. 35–37). This story can be seen as both a parody of post-Soviet culture and the ‘new Russians’, and of Bulgakov’s *Heart of a Dog* (*Sobach'ie serdtse*) (1925) and its theme of social and biological engineering. During the 1920s and 1930s, eugenic research and theories were not unusual in Russia, and prominently included the notion of the ‘communist man’ as a ‘new race’ in the biological sense, contrasted with a view of western humanity as being biologically degenerate. This led to fantastic scientific projects, such as the attempt to interbreed humans and apes. Such biological utopias climaxed in the idea of the *homo sovieticus*, which Bulgakov dealt with critically in his *Heart of a Dog*.<sup>26</sup>

Let us consider one further anti-utopian story by Tuchkov, ‘The Island of Freedom and Happiness’ (‘Ostrov svobody i schast'ia’).<sup>27</sup> The latter parodies the genre of utopia and addresses important philosophical issues relating to freedom, necessity, happiness and evil, while also ironically treating the myth of the ‘new Russians’ megalomania.

Evgenii alias John is a Russian multi-millionaire who builds a Russian America, a place he calls Libertytown, somewhere in the middle of Russia. It is a ‘Free World’ modelled on Californian society. The new citizens of Lib-

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<sup>26</sup>Cf. Heller and Niqueux, p. 242.

<sup>27</sup>Tuchkov, *Poiushchie v Internetе*, pp. 73–86.

ertytown are prosperous, since they have money, houses and careers; theirs is supposed to be an ‘остров свободы и счастья в огромном бушующем океане российского беспредела!’ (p. 86.) Notwithstanding all this, selfish ambition, greed, strife, crime and murder come into existence and multiply, while political intrigue and unemployment begin to dominate. Without collective experience of how to enjoy freedom responsibly and live simultaneously in peace, this new world’s enthusiasm soon turns into chaos and appears to provide posthumous proof of Catherine the Great’s *Nakaz* which stated that ‘One should not suddenly and through general law create large numbers of free men.’<sup>28</sup> Social unrest gives rise to a fascist dictatorship. The only way by which John might restore his initial concept seems to be his asking the United Nations Security Council for military intervention (p. 86).

‘The Island of Freedom and Happiness’ mocks ‘new Russians’ as they are often stereotypically and wrongly perceived. In addition, it also makes comical use of German history as a backdrop to events, not to mention the immediate post-Soviet euphoria regarding capitalism, democracy, and the West in general, succeeded by a subsequent process of enormous disillusionment. The story can also be interpreted as criticising the identification of material well-being with happiness. For most people of the post-Soviet period, as Vladimir Sorokin informs us, ‘even the last vestiges of a moral code have been destroyed [...] Many people seem to lack any criteria for evaluating reality at all.’<sup>29</sup> Moreover, Evgenii builds his city not for the sake of liberating the people, but for his own sake, for his own glory. Even so, he cannot create Libertytown without them. The people are a means to an end for him, therefore, not an end in themselves. Herewith Tuchkov, in the tradition of

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<sup>28</sup>Section 250 of the *Nakaz*, cited in: Procaccia, p. 103.

<sup>29</sup>Vladimir Sorokin in 1992, in Laird, p. 154.

Dostoevsky, Turgenev, Bulgakov and Siniavskii-Terts, touches on the fundamental issue confronting most human attempts to ‘realise’ utopia artificially: the elevated concept itself, the sublime idea comes to take precedence over human beings, who are reduced from the level of moral and spiritual beings to that of freely utilisable objects or commodities. In their semantic intention, therefore, and notwithstanding the cruel and sadistic plots, Tuchkov’s stories are very much old-fashioned, showing him once more as a subscriber to the doctrine of social and moral commitment and as contiguous with the concerns of Russia’s literary heritage.

### 6.3 ‘Moral Masochism’

During our analysis of anti-utopian themes and motifs in Tuchkov’s portrayal of the myth of the ‘new Russians’, we have occasionally pointed to a theme which had already surfaced in our discussion of Sorokin’s narration ‘The Swimming Competition’: that of ‘moral masochism’ and freedom. It is of particular relevance to Tuchkov’s story ‘The Lord of the Steppe’ (‘Stepnoi barin’),<sup>30</sup> which tells the story of Dmitrii, a malicious but successful banker

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<sup>30</sup>Tuchkov, *Smert' prikhodit po Internetu*, pp. 20–27. The story appears to contain a reference to the title of Turgenev’s novella *Stepnoi korol' Lir* (1870) and thematically to his *Zapiski okhotnika* (1852). Turgenev’s novella, through its treatment of Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, thematises power as well as historical issues and the dark sides of Russian society, such as serfdom. In addition, the novella reflects Turgenev’s interest in types of (Russian) people and their passions and conflicts, set at the level of ordinary, every-day life [I. S. Turgenev, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem v dvadtsati vos'mi tomakh*, ed. by M. P. Alekseev. *Sochineniia. Tom desiatyi. Povesti i rasskazy (1867–1870)* (Moscow and Leningrad: Nauka, 1965), pp. 415–423]. Similarly, the earlier sketches *Zapiski okhotnika* deal both with the theme of the Russian countryside, the forest and the steppe, as well as with that of serfdom [v. Victor Ripp, ‘Ideology in Turgenev’s *Notes of a Hunter*: The

who, after purchasing some land, re-establishes a feudal order upon it, with himself as *barin* and people from the surrounding villages as serfs. In effect, by signing Dmitrii's 'employment' contract (p. 21), these people voluntarily renounce their rights as free people and become his slaves. Their only remaining rights are that they are theoretically free to leave his employ on St George's Day and, of course, far more important for them, the fact that they receive wages. At the end of the first year, irrespective of the systematic maltreatment and physical abuse which they have undergone, they agree to prolong their serfdom, relying on the perceived opportunity to opt out in several years' time with enough money to retire on in the outside world. In reality, however, the experience of living in this feudalistic microcosm manages to transform these people psychologically: they become real serfs. A passage from the story will illustrate this:

[г]ода через три Дмитрий, ведя дело твердой и беспощадной рукой, сформировал в своих крепостных новое самосознание, новую мораль, новые ориентиры. К барину стали относиться уже не как к *чудаковатому богачу*, а как к *отцу родному, строгому, но справедливому, беспрестанно пекущемуся об их благе* (p. 26, emphases in original).

In other words, the peasants become so used to being someone else's servant that they develop a serf mentality, arriving at an awareness in which their

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First Three Sketches', *Slavic Review*, 38 (1979), pp. 75–88, and Thomas H. Hoisington, 'The Enigmatic Hunter of Turgenev's *Zapiski ohotnika*', *Russian Literature*, 42 (1997), pp. 47–64 (pp. 47–48)]. A further parallel between Tuchkov's short fiction and Turgenev's works is the fact that both frustrate and irritate the expectations of their contemporary readers to be offered clearly recognisable moral judgements [cf. Isaiah Berlin's Romanes Lecture of 1920, *Fathers and Sons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), p. 18].



existence as serfs seems perfectly acceptable to them, and where they cannot see reality for what it is any longer. In the serfs' imagination, Dmitrii, the one who abuses them, has become a well-meaning father figure.

The story deals with the theme of freedom, with the tension between freedom and economic survival, and with the question of how much significance spiritual values, such as freedom and human dignity, have in the contemporary and, more specifically, the post-Soviet world. It also addresses the corresponding theme of moral masochism and the question of human psychological malleability, not as individuals, but as members of a collective.

In essence, Dmitrii's social project succeeds in making a number of free, albeit poor, individuals consciously and voluntarily renounce their liberty and human dignity in exchange for being mistreated on a daily basis and not even being fed very well. There seems to be an implicit questioning in the story of the degree to which freedom and personal rights may be of use to individuals, or indeed to a whole people, living in poverty and without any economic prospects, or to people who lack as it seems any sense of purpose or vision for their own lives. In 'Stepnoi barin' the peasants derive their entire identity and purpose from subjection to someone else's 'dream', namely Dmitrii's sadism and his hunger for wealth and power.

'The Lord of the Steppe' operates to some extent as a reversal of Russian history (cf. p. 228 in this dissertation) and the emancipation of the serfs: Tuchkov's narrator calls Dmitrii's experiment 'anti-evolutionary' (p. 22); although time and civilisation move on, the people in the story are happy to revert to what at first glance appear to be long-forgotten forms of social and political organisation. The peasants feel relatively secure in their physical existence (something which they had apparently not felt in the world 'out there'), and indeed their number is increased by a priest who 'совершенно

справедливо разочаровался в современной цивилизации' (p. 26). As it seems, the priest re-discovers his purpose by living with the suffering peasants and being cherished by them, whereas earlier he might have perceived himself as being out of time and without relevance in modern society. The same applies to the peasants. They have become an integral part of a society, however small, and have been given a sense of purpose and belonging. By and large, their life is foreseeable and bearable, and they receive attention (for in a twisted and masochistic way lashes can be a form of affection, too);<sup>31</sup> what else might they have expected from life, one might be tempted to ask rather cynically. Relative to Turgenev's 'Raspberry Spring' in *A Hunter's Sketches*, Victor Ripp writes that: 'the peasants are part of a society that is not merely oppressive but also manages to insinuate its own rationality, a political system simultaneously so encompassing and persuasive that it is impossible to conceive of an alternative'.<sup>32</sup> In 'The Lord of the Steppe', Tuchkov appears to follow Turgenev in highlighting exactly this self-perpetuation of serfdom, be it political or psychological, even though, of course, Tuchkov does not conform to realist expectations, but alienates his fictional world from the real one. This is accomplished by way of grotesque exaggeration. Exaggeration is functionally described by humour theory as incongruity; Christie Davies writes about such humour that it enables people to laugh 'at what appears to them to be a slightly strange version of themselves; almost as if they were to see themselves in a distorting mirror at a fair ground'.<sup>33</sup> The fictional world of 'Stepnoi barin' is incongruent with the reader's historical world, thereby surprising, or rather, shocking the reader. At the same time, through such

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<sup>31</sup>Cf. Rancour-Laferriere, pp. 154–155: love can be won through the acceptance of abuse.

<sup>32</sup>Ripp, p. 86.

<sup>33</sup>Davies, p. 1.

exaggeration of reality, exemplified in the foregrounding of what governs this strange world, namely a combination of ‘moral masochism’, on the one hand, and its abuse by the powers that be, on the other hand, these very features are critically and in a condensed way shown to have persisted in Russian culture.

The questions of liberty and survival which arise in ‘The Lord of the Steppe’ are somewhat reminiscent of the discussion between the Cardinal Archbishop of Seville and Jesus in the chapter ‘The Grand Inquisitor’ in Dostoevskii’s *Brothers Karamazov*. In that story, the Cardinal defends himself and the elaborate system of religious and moral subordination and rule which the church has created over centuries in order to free mankind from what he regards as ‘bad’ freedom (represented by the Archbishop as the freedom *to* sin and become involved in moral dilemmas which ordinary humans purportedly could not possibly bear). Dostoevsky’s story seems to imply that the Cardinal’s arguments are in every way a misrepresentation of the purposes of Jesus. As evidenced by Jesus’s actions in ‘The Grand Inquisitor’, which is in essence in line with His real counterpart in the Bible, He came to bring forgiveness and freedom *from* sin (He withstood the temptations in the desert) and healing and restoration to life (He resurrects the dead girl on the Cathedral Square), as well as unconditional love and acceptance of mankind (He kisses the Grand Inquisitor).

In the context of ‘The Grand Inquisitor’, the Church had built a repressive system, which not only curtailed freedom, but also kept people in collective immaturity and dependency, and claimed furthermore that such bondage was spiritually legitimate. The real issue here is not the system as such, however, but the perversion of mind of those running and sustaining it, like the Grand Inquisitor who seriously believes that what he is doing is indeed on behalf

and for the benefit of the people. He is fully convinced of the goodness of the system, even if it results in such acts as the enthusiastic burning of fellow human beings as heretics, all to the greater glory of God.

In a way, ‘The Grand Inquisitor’ and ‘The Lord of the Steppe’ pose similar questions: What constitutes a socio-political system’s moral legitimacy? What self-perception and consciousness of worth do people have? Is their (unfree) position imposed from above, or in reality ‘self-incurred immaturity’, to use Immanuel Kant’s famous expression?<sup>34</sup> How is freedom to be defined? Why do people voluntarily relinquish their freedom and dignity? Do they do so simply through necessity, the fear of responsibility and freedom, or could it be the drive to experience suffering? The disdain for passivity and for the fear of accepting responsibility for oneself which Kant expressed in *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?* may provide a possible answer: indolence and the convenient refusal to examine their roles and reactive or passive types of behaviour, and, presumably, the inability to act upon what reason might tell them.

Laziness and cowardice are the reasons why such a large pro-

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<sup>34</sup>‘Self-incurred immaturity’ (*selbstverschuldete Unmündigkeit*) is a term used by Immanuel Kant in his 1784 essay *An Answer to the Question ‘What is Enlightenment?’* to describe moral immaturity in contrast to age-related immaturity or legal dependence. Its opposite, moral maturity, must be earned and acquired through conscious intellectual and character effort, namely ‘enlightenment’. Kant proposed that: ‘[e]nlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one’s own understanding without the guidance of another. This immaturity is *self-incurred* if its cause is not lack of understanding, but lack of resolution and courage to use it without the guidance of another. The motto of enlightenment is therefore: *Sapere aude!* Have courage to use your *own* understanding!’ [Kant: *Political Writings*, ed. by H. S. Reiss, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge, New York, Port Chester *et al.*: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 54, emphases in original].

portion of men, even when nature has long emancipated them from alien guidance [...], nevertheless gladly remain immature for life. For the same reasons, it is all too easy for others to set themselves up as their guardians. It is so convenient to be immature! [...] For enlightenment [from the yoke of immaturity], all that is needed is *freedom*. And the freedom in question is the most innocuous form of all — freedom to make *public use* of one's reason in all matters.<sup>35</sup>

In both narratives, the actions and reasoning of the protagonists, of the Grand Inquisitor as well as of Dmitrii and his serfs, are questioned by different narrative means. The chapter about the Grand Inquisitor is an embedded story characterised as a *poema*, narrated by Ivan Karamazov to his younger brother; moreover, Ivan recommends to Alesha that he should not take the narration too seriously.<sup>36</sup> In 'The Lord of the Steppe', however, the main device through which the implied authorial viewpoint becomes obvious is that of humour, a statement that can be made about his short prose in general.

In 'The Lord of the Steppe' Tuchkov follows a dialectical humorous strategy based on creating certain expectations in the reader, which he then goes on to disappoint or even to reverse. By so doing, the author infuses new meaning into the language, which results in a parodic and ironic effect. Laughter is created furthermore by the contradiction between the rational and purposeful action which the reader would expect from the characters,

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<sup>35</sup>*Kant: Political Writings*, p. 54–55 (emphases in original).

<sup>36</sup>'Why, it's all nonsense, Alyosha. It's only a senseless poem of a senseless student [...] Why do you take it so seriously?' [Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. by Constance Garnett, introd. by Edward Garnett, 2 vols (London: Dent; New York: Dutton, 1921, 1960), I, p. 269 (Part Two, Book V, Chapter 5)].

on the one hand (such as not signing the serfdom contract), and the latter's counter-productive and inappropriate action, on the other. Human inertia and indolence, the incongruity achieved by way of portraying the inability to react quickly enough to changing circumstances, can be identified as one of the main characteristics of humour, as outlined in our discussion of Bergson and Stierle in Chapter 4. It is a critical element in Tuchkov's 'The Lord of the Steppe' and in others of his stories, though perhaps to different degrees. It also is a major characteristic of the fiction of Khurgin, as we shall see in Chapter 7.

A few examples from 'The Lord of the Steppe' will suffice to illustrate Tuchkov's use of humour and how the latter reveals the story's implied authorial viewpoint in opposition to the repugnant plot. The story's opening line ['Дмитрий был продуктом великой русской литературы.' (p. 20)] might make the reader expect something 'great' of his character, since it speaks of his being a product of 'greatness'. The omniscient narrator then proceeds to tell us that Dmitrii's favourite writers were Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, pointing out that these writers are widely regarded as moralists. The rest of the paragraph makes it clear, however, that the 'greatness' referred to is precisely the (unexpected) negation by Dmitrii of norms traditionally promoted by moral institutions, like the nineteenth-century Russian novel: 'Однако его характер сложился не как сумма *духовных предписаний*, которыми насыщен отечественный роман XIX века, а как противодействие им' (p. 20, emphasis in original). The reader is surprised and disorientated by the fact that the study of the works by writers traditionally associated with the giving of moral guidance has led to the opposite effect, namely the celebration of greed and lust for power. The irony contained in the opening remarks is thus fully revealed.

A second example of Tuchkov's use of humour is as follows: 'Иногда выходил судить во двор — для усиления педагогического эффекта, обращаясь к народу без всяких обиняков: "Ну что, ворюги, собрались на суд праведный?!"' (p. 23, emphasis in original.) It is as obvious to the reader, as it is to the narrator, that there is nothing 'righteous' or 'educational' about Dmitrii's law-court. In reality, the latter is nothing more than a pretext for his abuse of power. The report about Dmitrii judging his serfs is comic and ironic, since the context implies exactly the opposite.

Furthermore, there are strong elements of satire of the Russian people and its 'slave soul':

По-видимому, суровые испытания закаляют русского человека до такой степени, что он способен перенести еще и не такие невзгоды, поистине нечеловеческие. Так было всегда: при татарах, при Иване Грозном, при Петре Первом, при Сталине. Дмитрий вполне подтвердил это правило (p. 25).

Such instances of humour permeate the entire story and justify the conclusion that the implied authorial viewpoint in 'Stepnoi barin' is one of disapproval of Dmitrii and his life, although Dmitrii's little feudal world can be seen as representing any individual or society that relentlessly pursues power.

'The Lord of the Steppe' is just as much about Dmitrii, therefore, a cruel and mentally sick individual who suffers from a 'нестандартная психика' (p. 23), to quote the narrator's characteristic understatement. Dmitrii has devised his scheme in order to satisfy his own desire for possession, control and violence. And his 'regime' is perpetuated by his son Grigorii who, we are told, inherits his father's 'passion'. Above all, 'The Lord of the Steppe'

concerns the peasants who figure in the story, people who crave for order, identity, purpose, stability and some sort of satisfaction in life, however limited and fragile. Since they appear to be entirely fixated on the immediate, momentary and physical aspects of existence, however, without any dreams or true vision for their future, they do not realise that what they are perpetuating is their own subordination to Dmitrii's desires: '[w]here there is no vision, the people perish' (Proverbs 29. 18, AV).

Tuchkov foregrounds the fact of voluntary agreement and co-operation of the people in the process by which they develop into serfs. The historian Vakar argued that

[h]istorians who have written that the tyranny of the Czars conditioned the nation to accept the tyranny of the Communists have missed that fact that Russian habits of obedience have been the cause, not the result, of political authority.<sup>37</sup>

This consent appears to be motivated by what Sigmund Freud once defined as 'moral masochism'. As contrasted with erotogenic and feminine masochism,

[t]he third form of masochism, moral masochism, is chiefly remarkable for having loosened its connection with what we recognize as sexuality [...] The suffering itself is what matters; whether it is decreed by someone who is loved or by someone who is indifferent is of no importance [...] the true masochist always turns his cheek whenever he has a chance of receiving a blow.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup>Nicholas Vakar, *The Taproot of Soviet Society* (New York: Harper, 1961), cited by Procaccia, p. 169.

<sup>38</sup>*The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. by James Strachey, 24 vols (London: Hogarth, 1953–65), XIX, p. 165.



It is in this context that Rancour-Laferriere speaks metaphorically of Russia's 'slave soul', a phrase to describe what is in his view a 'mentality that pervades Russia on all cultural levels'.<sup>39</sup>

Tuchkov's stylistic devices of humour, be it exaggeration or inertia, of parody and grotesque, all interwoven with offensive plot events, facilitate an 'implied authorial viewpoint' that stands against the worship of power and the convenient use of violence to further its ends, features which are otherwise so defining of characters and plotlines. Although these features clearly distinguish Tuchkov's writings from those of the Russian realists where meaning is suggested mainly at the levels of narrative structure, plot and character interaction and speeches, their shared interest in the freedom and well-being of society and the individual is, of course, largely co-extensive with the Russian literary tradition from Pushkin to Turgenev, and from Dostoevsky to Zamyatin. Relative to the theme of criticising certain Russian cultural dynamics like 'moral masochism' through its exaggerated and ironic representation, Tuchkov may be compared to Sorokin. It must be added that, thereby, the works of Tuchkov, like those of Sorokin, while demonstrating alignment with Dostoevsky's disapproval of the abuse of power, go a step further than Dostoevsky in their greater implicit affirmation of respect for individual freedom: they object to the 'moral masochism' which Dostoevsky's works sometimes seem to condone or even endorse (v. our earlier discussion in Section 5.2.4). This story, like others discussed earlier, deals with revolutionary and utopian discourse, which dominated Russia for over seventy years, as well as with the realities of post-Soviet life. It can therefore be seen as a humorous and implicitly critical attempt to come to terms with the past and present of Russian culture and society.

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<sup>39</sup>Rancour-Laferriere, p. 134.

## 6.4 Parody and Metafiction

An engagement with present social conditions and the Russian literary heritage also informs Tuchkov's work *The Last Kidney* (*Posledniaia pochka*), which is a collection of twelve stories (*povesti*), some of which had already appeared in earlier publications, either on the World Wide Web or in print, for example in *Poiushchie v Internet* (2002). The stories may be conveniently subsumed as 'black humour', given their often humorous quality, whatever the subject matter of their individual plots which range from weird to truly horrific. These stories portray the psychology, or rather psychopathology, of individual characters, their obsessions and interactions with the mostly very few co-inhabitants of their extremely limited social circles. The characters, who range from drug addicts and prostitutes to businessmen and doctors, do not intentionally gain power over others, but this results from their single-minded pursuit of their own inclinations. It is this very single-mindedness which is one of the chief humorous elements in *The Last Kidney*. As discussed in Chapter 4, heteronomy, the fact that a character is a quasi-automaton operated by the remote control of his *idée fixe* or consuming passion, is comical in that it highlights the incongruity between such a character and the non-mechanical nature of life. In such a way, Tuchkov's 'heroes' are identified as psychological and social outsiders, as people who are unable to meet the demands of life. Such social location of the characters is aided by Tuchkov's recourse to the principles of *skaz* narration, a device that Eikhenbaum,<sup>40</sup> Bakhtin<sup>41</sup> and Doležel<sup>42</sup> viewed as enabling the author

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<sup>40</sup>Boris Eikhenbaum, 'Kak sdelana "Shinel" Gogol'ia' in: *O proze: sbornik statei* (Leningrad: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1969 (first published in 1919), pp. 306–326.

<sup>41</sup>Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, pp. 187–192.

<sup>42</sup>Lubomír Doležel, 'Truth and Authenticity in Narrative', *Poetics Today*, 1 (1980.3), 7–25 (p. 22).

socially and linguistically to construct the opinions and values of characters. For the purposes of this chapter, it will suffice to make us aware of Bakhtin's and Doležel's contributions to our semantic understanding of *skaz* narration; Eikhenbaum's points about its social and humoristic dimension are of greater relevance to our analysis of Khurgin's fiction and will be outlined in Chapter 7, therefore.

Bakhtin was at pains to emphasize that, in the majority of cases, *skaz* is an orientation toward someone else's speech and discourse, with orientation toward oral speech as a frequent, if non-essential, consequence. He proposed a basically two-fold model encompassing various uses of *skaz* narration technique. First, the latter can be employed simply as an oral presentation of direct authorial discourse (Bakhtin identified Turgenev's use of *skaz* as an example). Second, it can be a means of presenting a socially foreign worldview and discourse (Leskov's usage). The most frequent rationale for, and effect of, *skaz* narration is double-voicedness, as, for example, used by Pushkin in his *Tales of Belkin*. Such double-voicedness can be achieved through the introduction of someone else's voice, which due to the oral and colloquial nature of *skaz*, would typically be a storyteller from among the socially disadvantaged common people. In doing so, the author enables himself to refract his own thoughts in the discourse of someone else, which can be necessary when unmediated authorial expression is impossible or undesirable. Consequently, the linguistic and intonational peculiarities of a given *skaz* narration would best be viewed in relation to the double-voiced nature of *skaz*.<sup>43</sup> A further semantic dimension of *skaz* narration was outlined by Lubomír Doležel, who describes the effect of this narrative device in Gogol's works as questioning the authentication authority of the narrator, and thereby also the authen-

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<sup>43</sup>Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, pp. 187–192.

ticity of the narrated plotline. He approaches *skaz* narration as a ‘narrative where all the norms and rules of the narrative act are made a target of irony’.<sup>44</sup> The nature of *skaz* narration will facilitate our understanding of the semantic structure of Tuchkov’s (and Khurgin’s stories), which otherwise appear to be relentlessly monovalent deconstructions of Russian and Soviet literature and history.

Let us begin with an analysis of the first story in this cycle, ‘Iraida Shtol'ts and Her Children’ (‘Iraida Shtol'ts i ee deti’) (pp. 7–31), a third person narrative which concerns the life of the famous woman sculptor and people’s artist Irina Stepanovna Shagina, alias Iraida Shtol'ts, first in Petersburg, and later in Moscow. After her graduation from grammar school before the October Revolution, she leaves her family, to become a regular visitor of the *Brodiachaia sobaka* artists’ café which was popular with Symbolist poets, and to live with other young people in a kind of Bohemian artists’ colony.

Greeting the revolution enthusiastically, Iraida joins the ‘monumentalist’ artistic movement whose task it is to create the ‘new man’ and becomes a famous sculptor, whose works are as much adored by some, as hated by others for what the latter perceive to be their ‘destruction of all concepts of beauty and ugliness’ (p. 12). The artistic movement which she pioneers with others is then given a proper name, that of ‘socialist realism’. She becomes an important national figure, a professor of sculpture, chairman of the council for art and member of the Supreme Soviet. She has one weakness, however: her physical appearance. While being neither beautiful nor ugly, she is the embodiment of her favoured artistic style: monumentalism. In fact, the narrator will have the reader believe that she was the actual female model for Vera Mukhina’s monument *The Worker and Kolkhoz Woman*.

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<sup>44</sup>Doležel, ‘Truth and Authenticity in Narrative’, p. 22.

Her appearance makes it difficult for her to attract a male partner. She is, however, in a position of authority and is willing to exploit those below her in the hierarchy:

Как у всякого профессора, у Ираиды Штольц были студенты. Существа абсолютно бесправные, вечно голодные, готовые практически на все ради того, чтобы после окончания училища могущественная патронесса не бросила их на произвол переменчивой судьбы (pp. 15–16).

This passage continues with a prolonged description of Iraida's sexuality, her abuse of a student, and the fact that three weeks later the student is exiled to Siberia, supposedly for an assassination attempt on Stalin. Iraida, we are told, becomes pregnant, has an illegal abortion at her *dacha* and buries the embryo's remains in the garden. Her recently aborted son then appears to her in a dream as the perfected 'new man', seemingly aged fifty, so she builds a monument in his exact image.

For years to come, this same pattern repeats itself many times over, giving Iraida the quiet 'joy' of secretly 'giving birth' to twelve such monuments, standing in a clock-like circle with a radius of twelve meters in the grounds of her huge *dacha*, allotted her on Stalin's personal order. At this point the implied author makes a direct approach to the reader, after interrupting the narrator, who has just begun to inform the former of Iraida's desire to be 'with the people' during the war:

В ее жизни все сохранилось как и прежде — радостная работа до изнеможения. Разве что перешла с «Герцеговины флор» на «Беломорканал». Да по ночам клещами сбрасывала с московских крыш зажигалки. (Чем, чем?

— переспросит автора данного отчаянного повествования читатель, родившийся после полета в космос Юрия Гагарина. Ну да, клещами, ответит невозмутимо автор. Сей инструмент имеет универсальную функциональность). Хотя могла бы и не сбрасывать. С ее-то регалиями и общественным положением. Но Ираида Штольц вдруг вспомнила юношеский экстаз по поводу жертвенности и очистительного пламени и твердо решила быть с народом во всем (p. 23).

The author calls his own work 'despairing', which is an entirely correct observation, and reveals a 'classical' or traditional understanding of aesthetics and morality, since the author's moral assessment of the plot is in no way different from the reader's. Thus, even when in this story and elsewhere, e.g. in the 'Internet' cycles, the plots suggest to the reader that the characters' evil acts are entirely logical and of no relevance to questions of morality, the narrator (or in this case the implied author) will intervene to make a casual, but unmistakable moral assessment. The authorial comment in 'Iraida Shtol'ts and Her Children' also gives the story a comic flavour, and this for two reasons. First, the author's anticipation of the reader not quite understanding a passage and the former's attempt to answer the latter's questions is unexpected as such. This in itself suggests the high significance of the authorial elucidation which is expected to follow. The implied author's explanation, however, is no real explanation at all. The device of suggesting that an important revelation will shortly be provided, which turns out to be empty or absurd when it is actually given, is reminiscent of Gogol', Kharms and Khurgin, and appears designed to amuse and disorientate the reader. Thereby, the reader is sensitised in his interpretative response to the bizarre story and invited to not take it at face value.

Let us return briefly to Iraida, who passes away in 1982. She receives a state burial and is laid to rest in the centre of the circle of twelve monuments, which no one, of course, realises stand above the graves of her five daughters and seven sons. However, unbeknown to anyone, during her early time spent in Petersburg, Iraida had joined an occult circle, ‘like many poets and artists of the beginning of the century’, possibly a reference to Briusov and Khlebnikov, who are mentioned in the story. The consequences of this become apparent during her funeral feast, because the salvos of the Kremlin guards in the centre of the circle release magical forces, and all thirteen monuments suddenly become alive. In a fantastic scene, accompanied by an earthquake reaching as far as the Urals,<sup>45</sup> and the instantaneous death of the general secretary of the CPSU, a resurrected Iraida points her finger at the assembled masters of socialist realism and yells abuse at them: ‘Этого, этого ублюдка давите, топчите!... А теперь эту суку поганую!... Теперь того мудака толстомясого рвите на куски!...’ (p. 28.) The death of the

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<sup>45</sup>This is a motif which Tuchkov might have adapted from Christ’s crucifixion which was also accompanied by an earthquake, highlighting the cosmic significance of the event which was even felt and reacted to by the inanimate Earth itself. The fact that this motif with all its ‘cosmic’ implications is picked up in this story also produces a comic effect, since the dimensions do not fit in with each other. Iraida rising from the dead to take a grotesque revenge on socialist realism could not possibly have the same effect as God’s act of self-sacrifice to redeem the universe. This part of the story also reminds the reader of some of the fantastic parts in Bulgakov’s *The Master and Margarita*; in the novel’s Chapter 32 [‘Forgiveness and Eternal Shelter’ (‘Proshchenie i vechnyi priiut’)], in the course of the magical cosmic journey of Voland’s company including Margarita to Pilate, the moon changes its countenance by losing a canine tooth and begins to shine brighter, a mountain range collapses, and even Yershalaim disappears [M. A. Bulgakov, *Sobranie sochinenii. Tom 8. Master i Margarita*, ed. by. Ellendea Proffer (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1988), pp. 376–380].

general secretary, as ‘pillar of the socialist empire’, and simultaneously ‘Atlas and Titan’, also brings about the demise of the empire’s main artistic form: ‘[и] погребла под своими обломками такое великое историческое явление, как социалистический реализм’ (p. 28).

The passage lends itself to a number of different interpretations: mockery of socialist realism and Symbolism, parody of the fantastic genre, satire on the USSR’s political system, the cult of personality, and also the historic political break-up of 1991. However, it should not be forgotten that the implied author also offers his reader an alternative ending, which appears to be an ironic comment on the commercialised state of literary ‘production’ in contemporary Russia:

Вероятно, уважаемый читатель, ты сильно удивлен такому финалу. Хотя ничего удивительного в этом и нет. Поскольку мы с тобой живем в эпоху рыночного искусства, девиз которого гласит: «кто платит, тот и заказывает музыку». А поскольку именно ты платишь свои деньги за эту книгу, то и вправе требовать, чтобы она наиболее импонировала тебе. Вот я и предложил — думаю, небезосновательно, — что именно такая развязка данного отъявленного повествования тебя более всего устроит. Если же с этим категорически не согласен, то вот тебе другое окончание. Более реалистическое, раз уж эта история так и не внушила тебе отвращение к слову «реализм» (pp. 28–29).

This second authorial interpolation also seems to imply a concern for the post-Soviet degradation of literature from a cultural and moral ‘lighthouse’ to a commodity.

The announced ‘realistic’ ending of the story goes as follows. In 1992,



Iraida's *dacha* is purchased by an entrepreneur; this transfer of real estate was made possible by the greed of art fund officials, who sold off all of the organisation's properties, parts of which had been allocated to art and artists by Stalin himself and his successors. The businessman turns the property into a copy of Versailles, using the thirteen monuments as a sun-dial.

This, however, is not the end of the story, since the implied author has one more word to say to his reader, whom he suspects of desiring a continuation of the narration:

хрен тебе, уважаемый читатель! Тут я ставлю окончательную и бесповоротную точку. Потому что заплатил ты за книгу сто рублей, а хочешь, чтобы я распинался перед тобой на двести. Рыночное искусство не допускает такого идиотского альтруизма. Соотношение дебета и кредита — вот истинное мерило всех вещей, включая и так называемый духовный продукт (p. 31).

This repeated introduction of the implied author into the fiction and the 'illusion of authorial presence' in the text, which is caused by the flickering of the author 'in and out of existence at different levels of the [text's] ontological structure',<sup>46</sup> is regarded as a postmodernist feature. So is the fact that a narrated event, the fantastic scene, is un-narrated, placed *sous rature*, erased and replaced by an alternative continuation of the narrative.<sup>47</sup> Both devices are metafictional in nature, since they essentially highlight the shaky and uncertain ontology of the created fictional world.<sup>48</sup> However, this

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<sup>46</sup>McHale, p. 202.

<sup>47</sup>McHale, pp. 101–104.

<sup>48</sup>Andrei Bitov's novel *Pushkin House* (*Pushkinskii dom*) of 1971 is a prime Russian example for the systematic employment of these devices.

metafictional dimension, while certainly foregrounding the literary process, appears to be subordinate to the story's humorous critical refraction of the post-Soviet sociology of literature, rather than flaunting its status as an artefact. Rather than investigating the relationship between fiction and reality, Tuchkov's story probes into reality itself (which is referred to literally in above quotation) by grotesquely representing it. The nature of 'Iraida Shtol'ts and her Children' is best described as play and parody, with socialist realism, post-Soviet literature and the literary process as its main objects. Although in this regard the story may be seen as simple superficial postmodern play and deconstruction, a conclusion to such an effect may be premature. Firstly, these self-conscious elements are comical, exacting a smile from the reader, owing to the fact that they surprise him; one may be tempted to suggest that Tuchkov turns his parodic skills on postmodern style itself. Secondly, the story's humorous and grotesque dimension may be approached in terms of providing psychological release to both writer and reader from the experience of previous limitations to literary creativity and freedom and the reader's enjoyment thereof. Thirdly, and perhaps more importantly, the passage just quoted above expresses ironically a concern with the fact that capitalism and its principles, which seemingly condition contemporary Russian society, are incapable of recognising, encouraging or rewarding altruism and literature, being spiritual 'products'. The implied author's intention in this story, and perhaps more emphatically so in the one to follow, is a serious, albeit humorously presented, preoccupation with the possibility of society and individual man losing sight of real literature, and with it, of the spiritual and non-materialistic dimensions of being human. In this regard, it shows a concern similar to that discussed earlier apropos of the story 'The Lord of the Steppe', where the peasants were enamored with a small degree of

immediate ‘prosperity’, at the expense of the permanence of certain values, like that of freedom. Neither story reflects an implied authorial agreement with a relativistic postmodern worldview, but rather one that indirectly suggests that absolute values, which are by definition external to the dynamics of society and the economy, are in danger of getting lost in everyone’s pursuit of personal peace and affluence, or perhaps even just survival. The logical consequence of such a development is, ultimately, the death of man as autonomous being, and his becoming a heteronomous cog in a universal machinery of cause, effect and necessity. These are deeply and specifically modernist concerns. Furthermore, the step from the subordination of values to political and socio-economic expedience to the subordination of such values to personal and subjective expedience is not a large one. In the Marquis de Sade’s case, whose thought and life was informed by naturalism, materialism and determinism,<sup>49</sup> such philosophy of the supremacy of the self-will ultimately found its expression in sadism: what *I* want, or what *is*, is right.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup>John Phillips, *The Marquis de Sade: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, New York, Auckland *et al.*: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 35–43.

<sup>50</sup>This suggested philosophical connection between the relativity of values and sadism on the one hand, and the death of man as result, on the other hand, may be seen as corroborated by Dostoevsky’s treatment of this nexus. Dostoevsky thematicised sadism and its principle of taking pleasure in the suffering of others in *The Devils*, in particular in the initially suppressed Chapter 9 of Part 2 [‘At Tikhon’s’ (‘U Tikhona’)], which contains Stavrogin’s confession to Bishop Tikhon and what appears to be an oblique reference to de Sade. In the same novel’s Part 3, Chapter 6 [‘An Arduous Night’ (‘Mnogotrudnaia noch’)], Section 2, Kirillov declares that if God did not exist, i.e. if there were no absolute values, than only his own will remained as absolute measure available to him, a conviction which leads him into meaninglessness and suicide [Dostoevskii, *Sobranie sochinenii. Tom sed'moi. Besy*, pp. 639–644; cf. also Part 3, Chapter 2, Section IV (p. 537); cf. Nancy K. Anderson, *The Perverted Ideal in Dostoevsky’s The Devils* (New York, Washington, D.C., Boston *et al.*: Lang, 1997), pp. 89–122].

As we have shown apropos of this story and will continue to do relative to the one that follows it, the implied author, by way of ‘comic dialectics’ and *iurodstvo*, rejects such way of living in his seeking after the good life for his readers and his people.

The last story to be looked at separately is ‘The Destroyer of Russian Spirituality’ (‘Istrebitel’ russkoi dukhovnosti’) (pp. 215–253). The focus in examining this story will be laid on intertextuality and Tuchkov’s interest in moulding the classics of Russian literature to his own purposes, and in having them literally ‘destroyed’ by his characters (cf. the story’s title).

Lev belongs to a literary dynasty; his forefathers have been associated with poets like Esenin and Gumilev, as well as with the emergence of socialist realism, ‘воспитывая нового читателя и гражданина скорее не уменьем, а числом и толщиной романов на морально-производственную тему’ (p. 215). The reader can already deduce that the narrator (and with him the implied author) approaches socialist realism with a degree of scepticism. Lev’s parents were responsible for the production of 39,405,000 books.

Lev suffers from a severe psychosis, hearing a ‘Voice from up High’ (p. 217) which instructs him to translate the four great novels of Dostoevsky into English, even though he possesses little knowledge of the latter language. Owing to the speed at which he renders these works into English, he is able to present only their plots, disregarding their ‘psychologism’. The narrator explains, in words replete with ironic humour, that this act of literary disfigurement was not the misjudgement of an inattentive or poor translator, but the ‘сознательный акт прагматичного торгаша, который совершенно справедливо полагал, что данные душевные материи чужды западному потребителю книжной продукции’ (p. 219). Even though the humour is

directed outwardly at Western literary production,<sup>51</sup> this statement is also aimed ironically at the post-Soviet Russian literary scene with its mass pulp-fiction production.

The story's hero travels as F. M. Dostoevsky to New York, where he succeeds in selling the rights of his works for twenty million dollars to Harry, a banker's son. Harry, whose idiocy is described as being four times as great as Lev's, adapts the novels further, and, in fact, completely changes them. *The Idiot*, for example, becomes *The Crezy Sergeant* [sic!], with Prince Myshkin transformed into David Woolf, a drug-addicted Vietnam veteran; the plot is set in Chicago, rather than in Petersburg. The books sell well and are subsequently adapted as films; this 'оскверени[е] шедевров великой русской литературы' (p. 222) procures Harry a fortune of one-and-a-half billion dollars.

On returning to Russia, Lev, who shares his first name with Dostoevsky's character Prince Myshkin, begins to enjoy his wealth, and falls in love with a prostitute called Nastia, who happens to be homonymous with the *femme fatale* from *The Idiot*, Nastasia Filippovna. She invites him to watch her at work while on her 'job'. The scenes play too much on Lev's nerves, and during the fifth 'sitting' he is driven through jealousy to stab one of Nastia's suitors to death. Driven by obsessive passion, perhaps not unlike Rogozhin in *The Idiot*, Lev then develops into a kind of slave of Nastia; 'понятий

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<sup>51</sup>The word 'reader' is replaced with the periphrastic phrase 'consumer of literary production' which implies that what is being talked about is not real literature (an important theme for Sorokin also, as we have seen). Such terminology and imagery are employed with regard both to socialist realism and the post-Soviet period; taken together with the title, which suggests that the hero, who will kill virtually all of Dostoevsky's fictional characters (v. below), is a 'destroyer of Russian spirituality', the reader can deduce that what is ultimately valued by the implied author are the Russian classics.

добра и зла для него уже не существовало' (p. 231; cf. p. 241.). This notion, however, is not propagated by the narrator, who is distanced enough to observe this profound confusion of values in the two characters with incomprehension, describing it numerous times as madness (e.g. p. 247). The 'implied authorial viewpoint' could well be seen as being in agreement with this assessment of the narrator. What 'The Destroyer of Russian Spirituality' imparts to the reader, therefore, is a sense of the end of human and moral categories.

The couple quickly become used to the pattern of killing Nastia's customers, who are placed in a container filled with acid and directly connected to the sewage system. Their victims all resemble characters from Dostoevsky's fictional world, to the point where virtually every single Dostoevskian character is murdered; ninety-one of Dostoevsky's heroes are explicitly mentioned, from Parfen through Ippolit Kirillovich to Sofia Matveevna (pp. 232–241). These are therefore all 'trans-world identities', fictional characters who move from one fictional world into another, which McHale views as a post-modernist device.<sup>52</sup> However, Tuchkov's transfer of Dostoevskian characters into this story might not necessarily be an example of 'transworld identity', but rather one of homonymy, and aimed at parody.<sup>53</sup> Again, such intertextual parody is also evidence of familiarity with Dostoevsky's works, and of ascribing to them significance as a continuous point of moral reference. Terry Eagleton refers to evil embodied in murder as bringing an end to the materiality of life, and therefore an act with a certain spiritual dimension. In a remark pertinent to the present context, he writes that

[k]illing other people, as Raskolnikov is perhaps out to prove

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<sup>52</sup>McHale, pp. 35–36.

<sup>53</sup>Cf. McHale, p. 36.

[...], shows that absolute acts are possible even in a world of moral relativism, fast food joints, and reality TV. Evil [...] is among other things a nostalgia for an older, simpler civilisation, in which there were certitudes like salvation and damnation, and you knew where you stood.<sup>54</sup>

Walter Benjamin likewise suggested a fundamental link between death and meaning: 'death digs most deeply the jagged line of demarcation between physical nature and significance'.<sup>55</sup> Conceivably, Lev's motivation for his evil acts may be metaphysically conceptualised as a pursuit of meaning, perhaps facilitated by the moral and social chaos of the post-Soviet period. At the same time, unlike Raskol'nikov, whose actions expressed the 'metaphysical self-determination of his free will',<sup>56</sup> he appears bereft of autonomy.<sup>57</sup> In fact, Lev is driven by abnormal passions, as the narrator informs us. This grotesque surrender of his autonomy to Nastia and ultimately to sado-masochism gives him and the story a comical dimension, which mitigates the story's monstrous plot and makes it more bearable, since the reader recognises that Lev's behaviour and course of action is not even in his own interest, hence absurd. Another humorous element is, of course, its being a grossly exaggerated parody of Dostoevsky's characters. Through this fictional alienation, the story magnifies and distills the essential concord in spirit between Raskol'nikov and Lev (one could also include Nechaev, Petr Verkhovenski, and Bazarov in this list): what *I* want, or am convinced of, is

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<sup>54</sup>Terry Eagleton, *On Evil* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 119.

<sup>55</sup>Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. by John Osborne (London and New York: Verso, 2003), p. 166.

<sup>56</sup>Ivanov, *Freedom and the Tragic Life*, p. 82.

<sup>57</sup>Cf. the narrator's characterisation of Lev as 'asocial' and 'a robot' (p. 223).

right, and if others suffer as consequence, then that is right, too. Similarly, the Dostoevskian theme of real love being in danger of being replaced by the bondage of destructive sexual passion is also enlarged and defamiliarised. The story illustrates the consequences of a value system based on subjectivity and relativism, if such can be called a system at all, namely, man's loss of his autonomous freedom and his descent into absurdity and meaninglessness. The quotation from Eagleton captures the notion that man, not being able to bear the loss of his own autonomous freedom and his being reduced to zero as consequence of his rejection of absolute values, might be prone to reduce others to zeros, to non-existence, as well.

The narrator, who apparently visits Lev at home, relates to the reader his own thoughts about the relationship between Lev and Nastia, calling it 'monstrous love' (p. 247). This comment certainly is a moral judgement given by the narrator, and may be seen as representing the view of the implied author. The narrator is engaged in conversation by Lev, who seems to read the narrator's thoughts and objects to them. He argues that the love shared by him and Nastia was pure in the highest degree and not criminal at all; they did nothing but relieve unhappy people of their existence, giving them a chance to be born again 'уже не такими уродами' (p. 247). What this is meant to imply concerning Dostoevsky's characters is a difficult question. The narrator entertains the thought (again anticipated by Lev) that Lev must indeed be very ill if he could come up with 'такую теорию, о которой не помышлял ни Раскольников, ни даже Кириллов!' (p. 247.) The narrator digresses into observations about lunacy and 'masochistic possession' (p. 248), before reporting that the couple have now stopped killing people because they had their last victim, Porfirii Petrovich, mummified and now keep (and abuse) him on a bed beneath the floor of their bedroom.



In *Crime and Punishment*, Porfirii Petrovich is the investigator with acute psychological insight into Raskol'nikov's skewed and criminal mind. Even if Tuchkov's Porfirii Petrovich might not be identical with Dostoevsky's homonymous character, the allusion to the latter in the context of this story can be understood, given that earlier the narrator has shared his thoughts with the reader about Lev having an even more criminal and distorted mind than Raskol'nikov. Tuchkov's story pushes the moral subjectivity, relativism and expedience that defines Raskol'nikov's crime, and the boundless passion that motivates Rogozhin's, to their logical extremes: the loss of morality as such. Unlike Raskol'nikov and perhaps even Rogozhin, Lev does not appear to experience remorse; he becomes mad, however, possibly a worse punishment than long years of exile in Siberia. Towards the end of the story, the narrator shares his impression of Lev being engaged in an important inaudible conversation with the mummy. The narrator then informs us of the virtually instantaneous physical degeneration effected in Lev by his madness, a visible, almost surreal transformation and reduction of his body to eyes and ears, which causes the dumbfounded narrator to leave the building. The narrator's sanity and traditional moral categories are questioned even further, though: an extraordinarily beautiful woman passes by, an event that he experiences as scandalous (pp. 251–253), for reasons not perfectly clear to the reader. The story ends with our conviction of the narrator's utter inability to make sense of the events he has experienced.

Tuchkov's intertextual links with Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and *The Idiot*, therefore involve a grotesque distortion of both. Tuchkov enlarges, amplifies and parodies some of Dostoevsky's motifs and narrative strategies, such as the latter's emphasis on psychological motivation and description and moral development; Lev is a grotesquely enlarged, deformed

and compounded version of Prince Myshkin, Rogozhin and Raskol'nikov. Apart from that, the story comically comments on the current state of literature and on literature in general. The chief aspect of Tuchkov's story, however, is its grotesque nature. The grotesque operates on the principle of incompatibility and disharmony<sup>58</sup> between the reader's worldview and expectations, on the one hand, and the failure of his worldview and categories of understanding to deal with the represented world, on the other. Unlike the absurd which describes the world as being inherently unintelligible, the grotesque questions man's very ability to understand the world. As in the invasion of the fantastic into the world of communist bureaucracy in Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*, this story of Tuchkov similarly thwarts the reader's expectations. The world of the grotesque is uncanny and evades understanding. Moreover, it is critically directed at society, since it relies for its effects on the worldview, expectations, habits and values which dominate society. Carl Pietzcker wrote that the grotesque, through its examination of man's ability to understand the world, occurs where man's existing bearings in the world are shattered, but have not yet been replaced by a new value system.<sup>59</sup> The monstrous, grotesque nature of Tuchkov's story foregrounds the loss of a moral and semantic grid which describes the existence of post-Soviet men and women.

## 6.5 Conclusions

Our analysis of the above representative selection of Tuchkov's short fiction has shown that a number of its defining features, such as intertextuality,

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<sup>58</sup>Thomson, pp. 20–28; Carl Pietzcker, 'Das Groteske', *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte*, 45 (1971), 197–211.

<sup>59</sup>Pietzcker, p. 211.

playful pastiche and parody, and grotesque monstrosity, and which at the surface level appear to be postmodern, are in no way monovalent parodies. Nor do they bespeak a relativistic ideation that would justify the conclusion that Tuchkov's works reflect a postmodern worldview. On the contrary, his compositional strategy, consisting in the use and adaptation of traditional motifs from fables and fairy-tales, but also from the classical canon of Russian literature, and their transposition into the post-Soviet period, are of a comical and mildly satirical quality. His surgically precise humour also places him in the tradition of Zoshchenko, and even more so, of Il'f and Petrov, who were able comically to expose the ills and absurdities of their time (and who also used Russian literature and history as creative playground).<sup>60</sup> A similar critical engagement with the real world is achieved through the creation of ahistorical, anachronistic, even mythological and archaic, narrative spaces, which combine social features from our own days with those of pre-Enlightenment or even pre-historic times, thereby foregrounding certain cultural continuities. One such continuity was singled out as 'moral masochism', the grotesque appearance of which in Tuchkov's stories led us to conclude that their implied author places high value on ideas of freedom which also have a well-known tradition in Russian literature and thought, albeit placing a greater emphasis on the individual than some of his precursors (cf. our discussion of freedom in Chapter 2). Similar conclusions were suggested with regard to the way in which his stories parody the utopian genre and utopian elements of Russian history. It was suggested that humour is an overarching artistic device in Tuchkov's stories, thereby facilitating not only the entertaining nature of his stories, but perhaps more significantly, the construction of an 'implied authorial viewpoint' which is in opposition to the all

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<sup>60</sup>Milne, *How They Laughed*, pp. 156–158.

too often repugnant plots. The characters' abnormality is a function of the grotesque and its implicit recognition that the world is changing too fast for man to comprehend what is going on; their heteronomy is a result of the loss of wider meaning and humanity, a perspective that may suggest typological contiguity with Russian modernism, and that the works in question may be regarded as 'neo-modernist'. This is the context in which the intertextual dimension of Tuchkov's works is best viewed: his parody invokes the ideas represented by names such as Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and Turgenev, and his often dark plots against the background of the end of a specific world and insecurity about the future, are contrasted with the ideas of Russia's literary giants, concerning ultimate meaning and moral and social responsibility. Tuchkov's stories ultimately facilitate the process both of *Aufarbeitung*, the critical coming-to-terms with the past, and of *Gegenwartsbewältigung*, the finding of one's new bearings amongst the 'ruins of glory', by absorbing, as the Russian modernists did, 'milk' derived from the classics, albeit in a decisively different social and cultural setting. Ultimately, Tuchkov's works engage critically with the realities of our postmodern world and its loss of absolute values and the dangers of moral and social relativism.

## Chapter 7

# The ‘Kharmsian’: Aleksandr Khurgin

*The human will has no more freedom than that of the higher animals, from which it differs only in degree, not in kind [...] In assigning mechanical causes to phenomena everywhere, the law of substance comes into line with the universal law of causality.*<sup>1</sup>

— Ernst Haeckel in his 1899 *The Riddle of the Universe*

Our earlier text-based discussions of Sorokin and Tuchkov have demonstrated that their works imply a thorough philosophical and social concern for man’s and woman’s alienation in the present world. Sorokin’s works imply metaphorically a focus on the attainment of universal, transcendent categories of meaning, and Tuchkov’s works, by way of amplification, highlight the consequences of a moral vacuum and confusion, namely the collapse of man’s autonomy. The works of both draw on themes and strategies of Russia’s pre-existing literature. In view of our attempt to offer generalisations

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<sup>1</sup>Ernst Haeckel, *The Riddle of the Universe at the Close of the Nineteenth Century*, trans. by Joseph McCabe (New York and London: Harper, 1905), pp. 131, 232.

relative to the post-Soviet period, we will now augment these observations through analysis of the works of Aleksandr Khurgin. Although he may be less well-known than Sorokin and even Tuchkov, his writings are no less suited to illustrate the thesis that segments of post-Soviet literature embody a typological, stylistic and philosophical turn towards Russian modernism for inspiration. Perhaps more clearly than the short fiction of Tuchkov, Khurgin's short stories offer themselves for analysis in the context of post-Soviet 'neo-modernism', since they draw directly from modernist poetics, in particular that of Kharms, while also engaging with the reality of Russian society after *perestroika*.

It has been suggested by Aleksandr Kabakov that, owing to their bleakness, Aleksandr Khurgin's works appear to fall broadly into the category of *chernukha*,<sup>2</sup> which some regard as a poetics which postmodernism utilises in a 'condensed' way.<sup>3</sup> *Chernukha* is identified by Alexander Genis as the most popular genre of *perestroika*: he refers to it as '“black genre”, a kind of writing based on horrifying descriptions of everyday Soviet life'.<sup>4</sup> Seth Graham, while focussing on the phenomenon of *chernukha* in Russian film, also points to the term's ironic and pejorative diminutive suffix *-ukha*, characterising it similarly as 'representational art that emphasizes the darkest, bleakest aspects of human life', often foregrounding physicality and 'naturalism'.<sup>5</sup> Graham goes on to argue that in Soviet times, the *chernukha* aesthetic

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<sup>2</sup>Aleksandr Kabakov, 'Garmoniia modnogo tsвета', in Aleksandr Khurgin, *Kakaia-to erunda. Rasskazy i povesti* (Dnepropetrovsk: VLD, 1995), in <<http://www.khurgin.liter.net/erunda/1.htm>> [accessed 8 February 2010].

<sup>3</sup>*Sovremennaiia russkaia proza (1990-e gg.–nachalo XXI v.)*, ed. by Timina, p. 47.

<sup>4</sup>Alexander Genis, 'Perestroika as a Shift in Literary Paradigm', in Epstein, Genis and Vladiv-Glover, *New Perspectives*, pp. 87–102 (p. 91).

<sup>5</sup>Seth Graham, 'Chernukha and Russian Film', *Studies in Slavic Cultures*, 1 (2000), 9–27 [pp. 9, 23 (note 1)].

‘represented a terminal, inversive parody of the entire teleological trajectory of Soviet ideology and culture from its beginnings until its last moments at the twilight of perestroika’.<sup>6</sup> In his discussion of *chernukha*, Genis suggests that there is nothing novel about it, and that the ‘genre’ stands rather in the hundred-and-fifty-year-old tradition of the ‘physiological sketch’ of the Russian ‘natural school’, which emphasised the ‘lower depths’ of nineteenth-century Russian urban society.<sup>7</sup>

The bleakness, happenstance and ultimate meaninglessness of existence and questioning of the notion of progress which Khurgin’s stories seem to imply, in conjunction with the stories’ intertextual character as echoing Kharms’s style, might easily suggest evidence of a postmodern worldview and creative outlook. However, in Chapter 3 we outlined the reasons why Kharms should be considered as a modernist writer rather than as a typologically postmodern one, and for reasons not unrelated, Khurgin is also better viewed as a ‘neo-modernist’ writer than as a ‘postmodern’ one. As in Tuchkov’s case, Khurgin’s recourse to elements of Kharms’s style is not ‘blank parody’, but constructive pastiche endowed with the purpose of expressing meaning relative to mankind that is largely co-extensive with Kharms’s view of man, and which includes a metaphysical dimension, as was considered in Chapter 3. Like works by Gogol, Chekhov, Zoshchenko and Kharms, Khurgin’s writings also possess a powerful humoristic dimension, both at the level of language, and at the level of plot and character interaction (or rather, as we shall see, lack thereof). The analytical concepts relating to *skaz* and humour developed by Eikhenbaum<sup>8</sup> and Henri Bergson<sup>9</sup> are particularly apt

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<sup>6</sup>Graham, ‘Chernukha and Russian Film’, p. 23.

<sup>7</sup>Genis, ‘*Perestroika* as a Shift in Literary Paradigm’, p. 91.

<sup>8</sup>Eikhenbaum, pp. 306–326.

<sup>9</sup>Bergson, *Laughter*.

for illuminating the work of Aleksandr Khurgin and will therefore be outlined and applied in due course.

Let us first turn to a discussion of a selection of *rasskazy* and *povesti* from three of his major publications: *The Cowboy of the Night* (*Nochnoi kovboi*) (2001)<sup>10</sup> (to be referred to below as *Nk*); *The Endless Chicken* (*Beskonechnaia kuritsa*) (2002)<sup>11</sup> (*Bk*); and *The Balalaika Graveyard* (*Kladbishche balalaek*) (2006)<sup>12</sup> (*Kb*). Our discussion will focus on Khurgin's narrative strategy and use of language, on the one hand, and on common aspects of his plots, on the other hand. Such an approach will facilitate our understanding of the overarching themes that characterise Khurgin's fiction.

Let us briefly outline these stylistic and thematic features. Khurgin employs *skaz* narration in almost all his work. His stories play with language, verbally, grammatically, rhetorically and semantically: repetitions, alliterations, Ukrainianisms, along with unexpected qualifications or nullifying afterthoughts figure constantly in these texts, along with a range of other figures of speech.

Thematically, it is possible to crystallise a number of recurrent characteristics, with respect to *locus* of action, milieu, heroes' characters and personalities, and their situation in life and history. Most of Khurgin's stories are set in *bytovye*, everyday locations, such as the hero's own flat, the homes of family members or acquaintances, factory work places or in a tram, bus or railway station, or at a café, hospital, or shopping centre. Apart from a number of stories in *The Balalaika Graveyard* dealing with the theme of post-Soviet Russian and Ukrainian Jewish emigration to Germany and the life of *emigrés* there, most stories are set in Ukraine, although a few take

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<sup>10</sup>Aleksandr Khurgin, *Nochnoi kovboi: povesti i rasskazy* (Moscow: Vagrius, 2001).

<sup>11</sup>Aleksandr Khurgin, *Beskonechnaia kuritsa: rasskazy* (Moscow: MK-Periodika, 2002).

<sup>12</sup>Aleksandr Khurgin, *Kladbishche balalaek* (Moscow: Zebra E, 2006).



place in Russia, mostly in Moscow. Precise geographical locations are not common, although Dnepropetrovsk and Vinnitsa are occasionally mentioned. The assumption that most stories are set in Ukraine is based on direct and indirect references to the Ukrainian language and 'realia', even where exact geographical information is not shared with the reader. Most stories are set shortly before, or in the time since, the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

The characters in these stories are typically 'little men', 'down-and-outs', often on the margins of society and challenged by a combination of circumstances, including unemployment and unemployability, old age, alcohol addiction, physical disease, and various kinds of neurotic and psychopathological behaviour leading to a loss of a sense of reality. Unable to connect successfully to their social and material environment, such heroes, though physically alive, merely vegetate. They are excessively introspective, which motivates the free indirect speeches of Khurgin's mostly third-person narrations, and the narrated or interior monologues which normally constitute a large part of his occasional first-person narratives. Moreover, the heroes are all more or less fainthearted, without ambition, desire or healthy drives. Helplessness, aimlessness, inertia, paralysis, indecisiveness, indifference and foolishness, often bordering on insanity, are probably the terms which describe best the mental and physical state of Khurgin's characters; the overall picture is one of striking monotony and complete surrender to 'fate'. The stories play with Soviet and socialist symbols and rhetoric, too. Moreover, they juxtapose and confuse abstract concepts with material objects, which sometimes has the air of profound, if pretend philosophy, while at other times it is reminiscent of slapstick comedy. A further thematic thread concerns Soviet and post-Soviet Jewish existence and identity and Jewish emigration, a thematic undercurrent which is present in most of his stories, but which is

foregrounded in only a small number.

A major theme of Khurgin's fiction is that of human relationships, in- and outside of marriage, among family, friends and colleagues. The relations portrayed are exclusively problematic and pathological, creating the impression that such relationships are indeed the norm in human society. No matter how abnormal such relations appear to be, however, Khurgin's representation of them never lacks the spark of humanity, owing to an ultimately sympathetic relationship between the implied author and his 'heroes'. We will expand on this aspect in a later section.

An equally important thematic thread in the stories is that of aimlessness, both in time and space: purposelessness of action and thought seems to be a recurrent feature of the heroes' behaviour. Related to this is the theme of chance, accident, coincidence and contingency: one of the commonest leitmotifs of the narrations is the use of the adverb *shuchaino* and words of similar meaning. This again relates to a further theme, that of random interconnectedness. In such works as 'The Country of Australia' ('Strana Avstraliia', *Nk*) and 'Each Went Their Own Way' ('I oni razoshlis', *Bk*), the apparently discrete individual story-lines which make up the *povesti* turn out in actual fact to be interlinked. The link may be spatial — for example a factory or a shopping centre where the histories of different people converge, intersect or separate.

Or it may be that some stories seem incomprehensible and absurdist at first glance, in that there appears to be no discernible logic in, or apparent reasoning behind, the plot that is narrated. The reader has to acquaint himself with often unanticipated and illogical developments. The plot or the sequences of action in the individual stories are easier to follow than their consequential logic: often there is no explicit or implicit explanation for why

things happen, or for why they happen in a particular way. Such lack of obvious narrative logic is particularly the case with the endings of a number of stories: some endings provide no resolution or explanation, and the plot appears simply to evaporate — a further indication of the theme of the accidental, purposeless and absurd nature of life.<sup>13</sup>

## 7.1 Semantic Interplay at the Stylistic and Thematic Levels

Having sketched out the major issues to be investigated, we shall proceed first with a stylistic discussion of Khurgin's works, beginning with *skaz* narration, which is a ubiquitous phenomenon in Khurgin's stories. Many of the elements of *skaz* narration as considered by Eikhenbaum relative to its stylistic dimension, and by Bakhtin<sup>14</sup> with respect to its semantic and structural significance, are also prominent in Khurgin's stories: *skaz* technique may be used to pinpoint the characters' location in society, with 'double-voicedness' allowing the implied author to emphasise a difference between his characters and his own position, and which allows also for the development of humour.

Turning to the first of these two aspects of *skaz* narration, that of placing characters in a specific social milieu, it has already been mentioned that Khurgin's characters are what today would colloquially be referred to as 'down-and-outs', people who are mentally unable to take responsibility for their lives, possibly because they have experienced so much misfortune, and

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<sup>13</sup>See our earlier discussion of the absurd in Chapter 3. On the other hand, the narrator regularly gives information on why certain things do not come to pass — the reasons for this being mostly found in the characters' apathy and sluggishness.

<sup>14</sup>Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, pp. 187–192.

received so much psychological damage, irrespective of whose fault that was, that they are permanently relegated to the margins of society. This impression is certainly reinforced at the stylistic level by the use of *skaz* narration and the use by the characters of substandard slang.

Secondly, one could argue that, by way of giving the characters their own voice in addition to the narrator's voice, the implied author allows them to express their view on life and possibly refract his own view through their expressions, speeches or thoughts, thereby indirectly relativising the narrator's authority as well as potentially facilitating empathy with the characters. For Khurgin's stories, this would imply that empathy with the unfortunate characters is thus added to the narrator's descriptions of their misfortunes, which otherwise would only result in mockery of the characters.

Thirdly, the wit and humour generated by *skaz* narration is an important part of Khurgin's humour, given the fact that many of his stories, if differently narrated, would not be humorous at all. Having said this, there are also a number of stories where such linguistic humour is complemented by situational humour, a subject to be looked at in greater detail later.

Eikhenbaum's analysis of the techniques of *skaz* in the work of Nikolai Gogol', will cast light on Khurgin's humoristic use of the device. In emphasising that the defining organising principle of *skaz* narration is the foregrounding of the personal tone of the narrator, as differentiated from other levels of semantic authority, rather than the subject or plot of the narration, Eikhenbaum argued that *skaz* may fulfil an important humoristic function which is best characterised through word puns, that is humour on the linguistic level,

as opposed to situational humour created by subject or plot.<sup>15</sup>

According to Eikhenbaum, the plot element of *skaz* narration is mostly static and secondary; it merely serves as material for the narrator to display his talent for puns. The specific nature of humour generated by *skaz* is that it can exist even in circumstances where the *sujet*, that is the plot or subject of the narration, is not comical at all. Since in *skaz* wit is tied to language and the use of individual words, as well as to their etymology and phonetic or onomatopoeic character, the humorous qualities possessed by the narration may be independent of the plot. The success of such linguistic wit relies on its articulation through the narrator, who is ideally an oral story teller, as well as on the extent to which the declamatory, dramatic and acoustic nature of the humour can be expressed, facially as well as through gesture. Hence, intonation is a major means for achieving the desired result. In *skaz* the sentences are not constructed according to the logic of normal speech and narration, but derive from the author's primary desire to maximise the humorous and acoustic effect. Gogol', for example, often used onomatopoeic names and diminutive suffixes; dissected words and refashioned them in an acoustically attractive way; chose unusual combinations; used rigorous and logical syntax at odds with the subject's absurdity, illogicality or comical nature. This narrative strategy, combined with the fact that the puns are often concealed, serves to heighten the comical result. Moreover, it also serves to present the narration as apparently spontaneous, improvised, everyday chatter, rather than as a well thought-out piece of literature, although, of course, such an effect is the result of great pre-meditation.

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<sup>15</sup>Elements of wit based on language, and in particular on sound, have also been analysed by Sigmund Freud, *Wit and its Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. A. Brill (London: Fischer Unwin, 1916), pp. 15–126, and Bergson, pp. 52–64.

In analysing the character of Khurgin's prose, it may be helpful to do so at different levels, to be referred to as 'microscopic' or 'local', 'macroscopic' structural, and the 'global' thematic-motivic levels of analysis. The 'microscopic' level of analysis is concerned with how language is used and sentences structured, and the themes expressed thereby, whereas the 'macroscopic' level of analysis focusses on the structure of complete stories. Let us begin with the 'microscopic' level of analysis.

Firstly, Khurgin's language has a strong oral and idiomatic character, which is best exemplified by the multitude of oral expressions which he uses, as well as by transition words, particles and fill-words: *naverniaka*, *bole togo*, *to li*, *ladno*, *bole ili menee*, *koroche*, *kazhetsia*, *vse-taki*, *vidimo*, *vozmozhno*, *voobshche*, *znachit*, *poniatno*, *gde-to*, *kak-to*, *primerno*, *vo vsiakom sluchae*, *kakoi-to*, *kstati*, *v smysle*, *tak skazat'*, *po-moemu*, *kak govoritsia*, *razve-chno*, *to est'*, *da i*, and so forth. In this sense, what Eikhenbaum cited from *The Overcoat (Shinel')* to describe Gogol's style is also applicable to Khurgin's narrators: 'One needs to know that in large parts Akakii Akakievich expressed himself through prepositions, adverbs and, finally, such particles which firmly have no meaning at all'.<sup>16</sup>

Another element of Khurgin's prose which is replicated throughout his work, is that of paraphrase or parallel structure, as well as of emphasis and repetition. A short passage will exemplify these; parallel periphrases are highlighted with small capital letters, while repetitions of the same periphrasis are underlined:

И выходило, что людей, на которых он мог  
как-то РАССЧИТЫВАТЬ И НАДЕЯТЬСЯ, немного —  
НЕ КАЖДЫЙ ВТОРОЙ И НЕ КАЖДЫЙ ПЯТЫЙ. И все-

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<sup>16</sup>Cited by Eikhenbaum, p. 317 (own translation).

таки они есть, надежные более или менее люди. Что уже хорошо в ТАКИХ УСЛОВИЯХ и в ТАКОЙ СИТУАЦИИ. Многим вообще НЕ НА КОГО НАДЕЯТЬСЯ И РАССЧИТЫВАТЬ, а уж ПОМОЩИ ЖДАТЬ и ПОДАВНО НЕ ОТ КОГО. Ни в КАКОЙ МОМЕНТ ЖИЗНИ ДАЖЕ в САМЫЙ КРИТИЧЕСКИЙ и ТЯЖЕЛЫЙ. [‘The Return of Desire’ (‘Vozvrashchenie zhelanii’) (*Nk*, pp. 103–152 (p. 130))], emphases added.)

What stands out, of course, is the repetition of ‘рассчитывать и надеяться’ — one might be tempted to regard this as the ‘microscopic’ or ‘local’ theme of this passage and indeed of the entire paragraph from which it is taken. An effect of this repetitive style is a linguistic reinforcement of the permeating monotony which characterises the lives of most of Khurgin’s characters. The basic information contained in this passage is the observation that many people do not have anyone to turn to when in need of help; the core clause is: ‘Многим вообще не на кого надеяться и рассчитывать’ (p. 130). Another stylistic element is that of paraphrase: in this first statement of the problem on which the narrator expands, the reader already encounters a repetition of the problem through paraphrase. This repetition, however, does not add any real meaning and only functions as a fortifier. This piece of information, however, is expanded into two complex sentences and further elaborated on, again without additional informational value. In the following clause and sentence, the same information is repeated twice, using a variant grammatical structure, which in itself comprises more parallel paraphrase. Therefore, it is essentially an example of what could be described as linguistic ‘fog’. The technique has, however, a powerful evocative and empathetic effect. The success of such an articulative, emotional and humorous result would very much depend on the intonational skills of a hypothetical oral

narrator or reader.

Furthermore, in the fourth sentence of the passage quoted above, one finds an example of Khurgin's tendency to follow a statement with a further specifying sentence or clause; however, this only appears to add specificity, while in actual fact increasing the degree of 'fog'. The first sentence argues that the character, an old man called Polukhin, does not know who he can turn to for help. The second sentence pretends to qualify (in this case contradict) this information, but also includes 'foggy' and indeterminate language (in italics) which relativises the affirmation just made about the fact that there still are helpful people in reach: 'И все-таки они есть, надежные *более или менее* люди' (p. 130).

Sometimes the apparent specification, relativisation, contradiction or closer determination of what has been said before, allows the narrator to continue the narration at a different tangent. This is the case in the passage under consideration. It focusses on Polukhin, who needs to receive support, money to be precise, from someone or other. Employing free indirect or quasi-direct speech, the third-person *skaz* narrator allows the reader to follow the intricacies of Polukhin's thought process about whom he can turn to. This develops into a general philosophical elaboration about many people needing help and being lonely. Very often, such add-ons work by repeating the word or sound which ended the preceding sentence, thus highlighting the humour of the narrated content. An example will illustrate this: 'Поэтому старики и не помнят того, что было с ними вчера. Нечего им помнить — вот они и не помнят.' (*Nk*, p. 131.) The simplistic logic of the syllogism contained therein ('They do not remember anything because there is nothing for them to remember.') is intended to explain why Polukhin or aged people generally have problems with their memory, but in actual fact it fails to illuminate any-



thing, something which is noticed by the reader who feels prompted to laugh or at least to smile. In these regards Khurgin's fiction shares key stylistic features with works by both Gogol' and Kharms. Relative to the first, it is the use of improvised, oral and 'foggy' language; with regard to the second case, it is the fact that, while the reader expects the narrator's words to contain meaning and significance for the plot development in terms of explication, they often do not provide the reader with the kind of information he desires in order to understand the plot and indeed the purpose of the narration.

Like Kharms's style, Khurgin's use of language and his lack of narrative cohesion at the 'microscopic' level, serves to sensitise the reader to an all-permeating questioning of categories of meaning, something which is matched at the thematic level. In Chapter 3, we proposed an analogy with fractal self-similar scaling in view of such a modernist 'strategy' of expressing semantic intention 'poetically' rather than purely discursively or narratologically. Similar to Belyi's and Kharms's works, Khurgin's chosen style of writing itself already suggests a questioning of the possibility of meaning as the implied author's overall motivation. A story worthy of attention in terms of illustrating semantic instability at the thematic level is 'Battle Pastoral' ('Batal'naia pastoral') (*Nk*, pp. 237–240) (1990), which is structured through a pattern of contradictory imagery. Set in an apparent battlefield situation close to height 121 'Nameless' ('Bezymiannaia'), a soldier called Tanaev lives with his partner Maria Sergeevna, or Masha, and their children in a tent, watching the news-programme *Vremia* on TV and making love 'like Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet', while the air is full of the sound of machine gun fire and grenades. Tanaev has one grenade left, and Masha tries to encourage him to fire it:

— Взял бы ты его, что ли, гранатой, — говорила в перерывах

между любовью жена Танаева и мать его детей Маша. —  
Мужик ты, в конце концов, или не мужик? (р. 237).

So he fires the grenade, the result being that Kolyvanov, the company sergeant major, comes from the section neighbouring height 121 'Bezymiannaia' and complains to Tanaev that a grenade has hit a stork nest:

— Вот же, — сказал, гадство.

А Танаев зевнул по-утреннему просторно и радостно, обнял жену свою Машу за левое ее плечо и спрашивает:

— Где же гадство, когда красотища кругом нас и восход солнца?

А Колыванов говорит:

— А гадство находится в закреплённом за мной секторе обстрела.

Там, — говорит, — на высоте 121 «Безымянная» пара аистов, понимаешь ты, проживала.

Гнездилась она там, значит, ну, а какая-то падла ржавая — гранатой их. Обоих. А у них любовная пора как раз в самом соку и в разгаре. Клювами выстукивали до того в гроба мать красиво — ну что твой тебе пулемет. И танцы свои танцевали, аистовые. Тоже красиво.

Сказал это гвардии старшина Колыванов, вылез из танаевского окопа и пошел себе по полю брани. [...]

И засвистели пули, и загрохотали разрывы. Но шел гвардии старшина Колыванов по полю, и ничего его не брало. А Танаев с любимой своей женой Машей и малые их детки смотрели на него из-за бруствера и чувствовали себя в безопасности. (pp. 239–240.)

As it turns out, Tanaev is completely incompetent, therefore, since it would appear that his grenade hit the storks' nest, rather than hitting an

enemy position. Interestingly, the storks' mating season appears to coincide with Tanaev's — a play on meanings, reinforced by the stork being a popular image of the delivery of newborn babies. More important, however, is the fact that Tanaev does not care at all about the battle he is supposed to be taking part in: he is apathetic. He is more concerned with enjoying his time with Masha, admiring the beauty of the sunrise, and is not worried about Kolyvanov walking over the battlefield.

The juxtaposition of conflicting images evoking idyllic tranquillity, peace of nature and ordinary life including love, with those of war, chaos, noise and destruction, is dominant in the story. The title 'Battle Pastorate', for example, applies the musical or artistic genre of pastorate with its often peaceful, soothing and uneventful depictions to a deeply disturbing situation fraught with unpredictability, violent action, chance and contingency (the storks, who have nothing to do with the battle, get killed, while Kolyvanov, who walks right through the field, does not). To cite another example of such conflict of imagery: '[...] где-то в районе высоты 121 «Безымянная», мирно строчил пулемет' (p. 237). There are two aspects to this sentence which do not make much sense. First, if one names a place, why would one name it 'anonymous', the more so if one takes into account the fact that the place already has some sort of geographical designation (height 121)? Secondly, and more significantly, the narrator tells us that 'мирно строчил пулемет' — how can a machine gun rattle peacefully? Neither the sound nor the result is very peaceful. However, this description might make sense if one re-interprets the meaning of the first word. If 'мирно' is taken to stand for the regularity, simplicity and monotony of the machine gun's sound, if one single-mindedly zooms in on the rattling machine gun without considering what this actually means (in terms of a war being conducted and people dying in large

numbers), one could possibly accept the peaceful rattling. Interestingly, the peaceful rattling of the machine gun is juxtaposed with the deep sleep of the children. However, having said this, there still is an element of absurdity in such juxtapositions, since war and peace are not really readily reconcilable concepts. It is an absurdity that can surely be individually experienced, and although it does not necessarily convey absolute meaninglessness, it testifies to the loss of distinctive, original meaning and illustrates a shift in sense, a blurring of semantic boundaries, thereby challenging the concept and the value of meaning and of man's ability to make sense of the world as such.

The theme of idyll, beauty, romance and peace being experienced within a chaotic, unpredictable and deadly war setting is somewhat reminiscent of the modernist writer Isaak Babel's *The Red Cavalry* (*Konarmia*). While there is a dimension of moral seeking in Babel's work, which, at first sight, appears absent in Khurgin's story, 'Battle Pastoral' still has meaning in that it investigates the absurdity of life and meaning itself, a deeply moral pursuit, as we have seen our discussion of the absurd in Chapter 3. Furthermore, both *The Red Cavalry* and 'The Battle Pastoral' present the subordinate themes of 'collateral' suffering of animals (storks and horses respectively) who have no stake in war whatsoever, and that of fallible humans, of soldiers who do not adequately live up to the extraordinary challenges and pressures of war, both professionally and personally.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>There is a further, stylistic parallel of Khurgin's work with *The Red Cavalry*: its quasi-poetic style which often is based on phonetic considerations. The whole story is marked by a mixture of colloquial language (e.g. '[...] гранатой их.') and of an approximation to poetic language: Khurgin sometimes uses old words ('брань'), unusual word order ('гвардии старшина') and plays phonetic games (cf. the plosive по-/б-sounds, 'пошел себе по полю брани', and вы/ви/во/ва, 'танцы свои танцевали, аистовые. Тоже красиво'). He uses repetitions and alliterations also, thus reinforcing the monotony and boredom,

## 7.2 Structure

Having pointed out the main characteristics of Khurgin's prose at the 'microscopic' level and its semantic interplay with his writings' thematic dimension, we can now move to the 'macroscopic' and 'global' analysis, that is to say, to the structure and overall composition of his stories. As has already been outlined and will become clearer, the wider significance of Khurgin's narrative strategy is that it spreads the derivation of implied meaning across various levels, including that of overall structure and composition. Though different in specifics, Khurgin's fiction shares with that of Sorokin and Tuchkov, on the one hand, and with that of Belyi and Kharms, on the other, the fact that often, the narratological dimension of plot and narrative structure on their own are revealing of no straightforward semantic purpose. As shown in the respective discussions, it is at the 'higher' compositional and thematic-motivic level, in conjunction with the suggestion of implied thematic self-similarity at the 'microscopic' or stylistic level, where the narratives begin to make more sense: in Khurgin's fiction, all levels, the 'microscopic' of language and style, and its related 'local' themes, the 'macroscopic' level of structure and composition of the narratives, and the overarching 'global', thematic level all seem to reflect and reproduce the same sense of monotony, heteronomy, despondency and meaninglessness.

The first example, 'In the Sands at Iasha's' ('V peskakh u Iashi') (*Nk*), will be analysed with respect to the story's narrative structure and overall composition, while in the following two *povesti* 'The Country of Australia'

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the impression of ordinary life continuing amidst chaos (emphases added): '*Сказал это гвардии старшина Колыванов, вылез из танаевского окопа и пошел себе по полю брани. [...] И засвистели пули, и загрохотали разрывы. Но шел гвардии старшина Колыванов по полю, и ничего его не брало [...]*' (pp. 239-240).

(‘Strana Avstraliia’) (*Nk*), ‘And Each Went Their Way’ (‘I oni razoshlis’’) (*Bk*, pp. 219–257) it is the loose interconnectedness of the stories’ constituent individual sub-plots which will be examined. The discussion of ‘In the Sands at Iasha’s’ is intended to reveal the narrative pattern or structure of Khurgin’s stories. His narrative technique alternates between an actual representation of the plot, questions of why certain things happen, explanations of the characters’ actions or thoughts, and what could be called ‘philosophical elaboration’ of the narrator. These philosophical meditations are often completely irrelevant to the plot itself, but have an emotional and evocative effect and relate to the general subject of the story. Thereby, they provide an additional perspective on the plot which in most cases reinforces and gives scope to the characters’ experience of absurdity.

‘In the Sands at Iasha’s’ (*Nk*, pp. 204–234) concerns the short visit which the first-person narrator and his female partner, Dina, make to Central Asia. Before this takes place, Dina has received a visitor from Central Asia who asks her to attend the funeral of her former husband, Iasha, who has seemingly died. The narrator decides to travel with his girl-friend. The couple stay in a hotel, which also is the main *locus* of the narration, which is spread over thirty pages with very little in the way of plot events. Most of the narrative consists of the narrator’s inner thoughts, suspicions, fears and explanations. The narrator suffers from the intense heat and humidity of the Central Asian climate. He suffers from not knowing what it is that is really going on there, since Dina, who tells him very little, leaves him alone in the hotel most of the time, as she says that she has things to do. Since Iasha does not seem to be fully dead yet, but is only said to be at the point of dying, the narrator suspects that they might have fallen victim to some sort of criminal activity and begins to fear for his life and for that of Dina. The narrator’s physical

exhaustion is intensified by nervous debility, since he is now afraid of being framed. He tries to fight physical and mental exhaustion by taking showers, sleeping, walking along the corridors of the hotel, getting a cup of tea from the reception, or waiting for a phone call to resolve matters. This slightly enigmatic story ends with the two of them flying back home, accompanied by an additional piece of luggage. The reader is not informed of the reason for the appearance of this new item, but mention of it is possibly intended to confirm the narrator's suspicions about criminal activity, and it appears that Dina may have agreed to do some smuggling. However, this remains at the level of conjecture.

Having thus summarised the plot, we may now continue with a structural dissection of the opening part of the story. It begins with the narrator's observations of Dina, although her name will not be mentioned as such until several pages later: '[о]на терла лицо руками [...]' (p. 204). He describes how she proceeds to colour parts of her face black: '[п]риобретая трагический и в то же время комический, клоунский вид.' This straightforward description (straightforward in a technical sense; the fact that the reader is left clueless about why Dina should apply black make-up is of no present concern) is followed by a rhetorical question regarding the subject of 'youth', a subject without relevance to the plot. This question is, in turn, used as a route towards some general philosophizing concerning the nature of youth:

Ну что это в самом деле за боевая раскраска у молодой женщины, пусть молодости и не первой? Хотя все эти бабушкины сказки о второй и последней молодостях. Молодость, как и детство, одна, в единственном числе.

Obviously, this 'philosophical' portion is a pretence for creating humour or

a humorous insult, as the narrator states that his partner has, indeed, aged. The dryly comical or ironic effect is achieved through semantic enlargement of ‘youth’ into what is strictly speaking not youth anymore, the proverbial ‘second youth’. The narrator, however, having used the expression, rejects the notion as false.

A new question is asked which looks for clarification of the aforementioned statement and is then responded to: ‘То есть — почему, как детство? Как всё.’ However, both question and answer are humorous. Their humorous quality is rooted in the reader’s expectation of being given a real explanation of why the narrator has chosen to compare youth with childhood, rather than with adulthood or old age. After all, at first sight, these all appear to be equally valid comparisons since they relate to the same *tertium comparationis*: a season of life which passes irrevocably with time. This expectation is dissolved, however, by the narrator’s very brief affirmation, which is not even a real sentence, that indeed he had no particular reason for choosing childhood over any other season of life as comparison. The narrator plays with the reader’s expectation by artificially creating the desire to understand something where there is in reality nothing to understand. At the expense of answering the original question about what kind of make-up Dina uses, the narrator takes us down a ‘philosophical’ byway, whose main theme, the cycle of life, is playfully and metaphorically repeated in different colours and shades:

[п]рирода, в общем, скучно и однообразна. В ней все по одному образу, по единому образцу. Весна, лето, осень, зима. Можно сказать, что у дерева или у человека весен много, и лет много, и зим. Да, маленьких и локальных — много, но все они объединяются жизнью в одну большую весну, одно общее



лето, одну холодную зиму. В конце которой — конец. Тоже  
один-единственный. Конец, так сказать, концов (p. 204).

Such a passage of mellifluous ‘philosophy’ (for lack of a better word) again adds no substantive meaning to the story’s plot, nor even to the transitory subject of youth; it is simply a colourful variation on the same theme. It does, however, make the narrator come alive as a very ‘*rasstroennyi*’, shattered and sensitive individual who lives in his own peculiar world. Although he is physically and emotionally aware of the real world, he nevertheless comes across to the reader as being somewhat out-of-tune with it. The most random observation of any situation or person can turn into the long digression of a freely wandering mind that is either bored or has been hurt by real life. Such ‘philosophical’ passages, of which the former is only one example, have two important *raisons d’être* in the story as a whole. First, such elements of narratorial digression serve as an indirect characterisation of the hero, where narrator and hero are identical. Second, even where hero and narrator are not one and the same, these in the primary sense meaningless digressions add, on the structural level, to the sense of helplessness, boredom, monotony, meaninglessness and absurdity of life which is experienced by virtually all of Khurgin’s heroes. In such a way, this digressive ‘voice’ or perspective of the narrator, given either through interior monologues or free indirect discourse respectively, empowers the reader to identify implied meaning.

The next story to be examined is ‘And Each Went Their Own Way (A Four-Part Triptych)’ (‘*I oni razoshlis’... (chetyrekhchastnyi triptikh)*’ (*Bk*)). This consists of four separate stories and the plot-lines of different groups or pairs of people. These stories or scenes are completely independent from one another, with the one exception that all these people meet very briefly when doing their holiday shopping at a wholesale market just before Christmas.

The tangential or peripheral interconnectedness of these stories seems to be reminiscent of Gogol's composition in *Dead Souls* (*Mertvye dushi*). In his famous article on *The Overcoat*, Eikhenbaum writes that '*Dead Souls* are put together by way of the mere accretion of separate scenes, united only through Chichikov's journeys'.<sup>18</sup> The play with language which is inherent in Khurgin's writing already begins with the subtitle: 'chetyrekhchastnyi triptikh'. A triptych consists by definition of three parts. A 'four-part triptych' is an oxymoron, since it combines two mutually exclusive concepts (the numbers three and four are not reconcilable). Khurgin appears to use 'triptych' here in a figurative sense, to express the idea of unity in diversity, pointing out as it were that what follows are four individual stories which still belong together and supplement one other.

The first scene, 'Carbonation' ('Gazirovka'), concerns Makashutin, Adik Petrut', Dudko and Makashutin's wife Niusia, who pass their time carbonating vodka and drinking the result. The idea has come into their heads because these friends are tired of sparkling wine and other more traditional alcoholic drinks. However, once they have exhausted their carbon dioxide reserves, their time together ends, since the reason for their being together is gone: 'И они разошлись. В разные стороны. По своим домам и жилищам' (p. 224).

The second scene, 'Love' ('Liubov'), narrates how the two lovers Alina and Pechenkin, after making love, take a walk in the snow-covered and empty streets of their city and have a cup of coffee and a chat in the café *At Kafka's* (*U Kafki*), before Alina goes back home to her husband, mother and two sons. Again, there are a number of examples of linguistic wit in this story. The name of the restaurant suggests a relation to the early twentieth-century

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<sup>18</sup>Eikhenbaum, p. 307 (own translation).

writer Franz Kafka, but this turns out to be a premature conclusion. In the fourth scene, 'The Store' ('Sklad'), the reader is given an explanation by the café's waitress, Inna: '— Кафка — это просто так, — сказала Инна. — Это Катя Федорова, Кирилл и Андрей. Сокращение такое, составляющее название кафе из имен его соучредителей' (p. 249). Another example of humorous play with language in 'Love' concerns the matter of linguistic ambiguity. The couple pass by a shoe shop with the name *Obuv' na Lenina*. The reader immediately thinks of the Russian revolutionary leader. The pun, however, is quickly explained: 'Не в смысле, на Владимира Ильича обувь в продаже, а в смысле, магазин на улице Ленина расположен' (p. 225).

The third scene of 'And Each Went Their Own Way', 'The Evening' ('Vecher'), concerns a group of men, including the narrator, who go out one evening. One of them, Kachur, loves to rob people, be it an elderly lady whom he pushes into the snow, or people leaving a bar whom he hits in the face so as to relieve them of their earnings.

In the fourth and longest scene, 'The Store' ('Sklad'), all these characters are briefly brought together when doing their Christmas shopping, as in the case of Alina and Pechenkin. They have a polite conversation about sausages, as if they were strangers meeting for the first time. Stalentina Vladimirovna (again, the name has no connection to Iosif Stalin but instead to Madame de Staël), the elderly lady who was robbed by Kachur the night before, meets the latter in the market, where he works in the store. Stalentina asks the people around her to arrest the thief, but Kachur simply refuses to admit to his crime, given that there are no witnesses to confirm Stalentina's allegation. The narrator of 'The Evening', who with his friends works as a loader in the market, meets Inna, the waitress from *At Kafka's*, who also works for the market's inventory department, and flirts with her. Makashutin, unable to

find a container with carbon dioxide, searches for an alternative means of celebrating the holiday, and opts for champagne.

There is also humour to be found in the various narratorial digressions contained in 'The Store'; one instance makes use of the conflation of Christmas as a religious as well as a commercial feast. In essence, the festival is a commemorative spiritual occasion, of course, but in reality for many people it is simply an occasion to celebrate and to get drunk. For the owner of the market, however, which sells its products at wholesale prices, it is an occasion to make real profit. Because of the special festive sale offers, the market is transformed into a

место паломничества, в крупнейший центр удовлетворения насущных человеческих потребностей и желаний. Другими словами, склад служит обществу, делая его, так же, как и его членов, лучше и добрее. Потому что когда граждане — члены общества — имеют удовлетворенные потребности, они автоматически становятся добрее и лучше — даже самые из них плохие и недобрые. А вместе с ними, значит, и общество в целом тоже становится добрым и хорошим. Или хотя бы приличным. Отсюда вывод — чем больше у общества складов, тем лучше для него, тем оно здоровее в экономическом смысле и в смысле нормализации морального духа. Это обязаны всесторонне понимать не только бизнесмены новой формации, но и политики верхнего эшелона власти (p. 237).

Apart from indirectly highlighting the ironic fact that the shopping market seems to attract more 'pilgrims' than the churches, the above passage also contains an example of syllogism, or of logical, but false argumentation. The assertion that human beings are more content and happy when their needs

are met is true to a certain extent (albeit in a temporary way, as the next desire is already lurking around the corner); it is also true that commerce and trade are instrumental in meeting these economic needs. The combination of both assertions, however, i.e. that a greater number of shopping centres creates a better society, as suggested by the narrator, is, irrespective of its apparent logic, false. This false argumentation is also humorous, because its falsity is intentionally foregrounded, together with the fact that all too often people are deceived into believing such 'logic'. While it is generally accepted that 'goodness' and 'happiness' are above all moral categories rather than economic ones, nevertheless, economic satisfaction is widely pursued, sometimes with almost religious fervour, as if it were the sole source of happiness. The source of social happiness presented in the story, a shopping centre, is such an everyday institution and the vision of grocery markets mushrooming all over the country according to some political masterplan for improving society is so absurd and senseless because out of tune with the principle of cause and effect, that this observation about the drivenness of human nature causes the reader to smile, rather than to despair.

Once more, the digression, while not adding anything to the almost non-existent plot, grafts substance onto the story's ostensible subject, that of holiday shopping. At a different level, the reader gains the impression that both plot and subject serve primarily as material for the author to mould language at his pleasure. In this regard Khurgin could again be linked with Gogol', of whom P. V. Annenkov wrote the following: 'He said that, for a tale (*povest'*), and a story (*rasskaz*) in general, to be successful, it suffices if the author describes any room or street that he is familiar with'.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>P. V. Annenkov, *Literaturnye vospominaniia* (Moscow: Goslitizdat, 1960), p. 77, cited by Eikhenbaum, p. 307 (own translation).

The story ‘The Country of Australia: A Tale from Provincial, but also from the Other Life’ (‘Strana Avstraliia: povest' iz provintsial'noi, a takzhe iz inoi zhizni’, *Nk*, pp. 7–102) depicts the characters as coincidentally (‘по обыкновенному случайному совпадению и больше ни по чему’, p. 89) and for mostly different reasons, boarding the same airplane, presumably en route to Australia. The captain is a bad navigator and loses track of the flight-path. Eventually, the plane is forced to perform an emergency landing in an unknown country, which the characters speculate is Australia. They are not allowed to leave the airport, and their home country (which appears to be Ukraine) takes no interest in their repatriation. Consequently, the grounded plane becomes their new home; they do business with the customs officials and cultivate a vegetable garden on the airfield. The reader’s first reaction is to laugh at this astonishing and ingenuous scene, a reaction which is brought rapidly to an end by a note announcing that they were forever forgotten by their families at home. In all of the above stories, the structural and compositional effect of such accidental interconnectedness is one of profound and all-permeating randomness of life and ultimately, absurdity.

### 7.3 Themes

The theme of the absurd is a key aspect of Khurgin’s poetics with regard to which Khurgin and Kharms seem kindred spirits. The short passage from ‘The Country of Australia’ cited above is indeed programmatic: ‘по обыкновенному случайному совпадению и больше ни по чему’ (p. 89). *Sluchaino* and *sovpadenie* are practically synonymous and part and parcel of Khurgin’s device of paraphrase. Even so, the repetition emphasises the idea. What should be commented on is the combination with the word *oby-*

*knovenno*. There is not necessarily any genuine conflict or tension between the concepts of ‘usual’ and ‘coincidence’. However, and once again this is typical for Khurgin’s writings, this verbal construction suggests a high level of normality of accidents and coincidences. And indeed, coincidences are one of the pivots on which Khurgin’s fictional world is mounted. The unintelligibility of the world, and the individual’s impotence in its face, is the rule, at least one that describes the characters’ experience. The plots confirm this explicit statement about such pervasive absence of meaning.

Of course, the principle of coincidence can also be viewed as a positive ordering pattern, for example as divinely inspired, as was practised by Boris Pasternak in his work *Doctor Zhivago* (1957). In Khurgin’s works, however, the coincidences that occur have no really positive consequences and wider meaning, apart from conveying at the ‘higher’ motivic level a view of the world in which man and woman have lost their autonomous freedom, a world that operates outwith the principles of cause and effect, and that is thereby beyond comprehension. This view is corroborated by the third person narrator of the story ‘He did not Save’ [‘Ne spas’ (2000), *Nk*, pp. 300–306], who, presumably with the authority of the implied author, muses about the impotence of God (p. 306), thereby implying the absence of a higher power that could consciously arrange coincidences. Nevertheless, even if the implied author appears to be unable to identify the originator of the inexplicable, his attempts to such an effect certainly imply the suggestion of a metaphysical dimension to human existence, lying in the very acknowledgement that there is more to life than observable cause and effect, similar to Kharms’s works, which we considered in Chapter 3.

While our discussion so far has already identified the absurdity and unintelligibility of life as the main theme in Khurgin’s fiction, a short analysis

of Khurgin's characters will give further insight. His heroes may well be characterised by the following words from Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*:

There are people about whom it is difficult to say something that will at once describe them entirely as they are at their most typical and characteristic; those are the people who are usually called 'ordinary' or 'average', and who actually do represent the average in any sort of society. In their novels and stories writers mostly try to pick out certain social types and represent them imaginatively and artistically — types one rarely comes across in real life in the way they are represented in fiction and which nevertheless are more real than real life.<sup>20</sup>

What is said in this authorial digression in *The Idiot* can also be applied to Khurgin's writing: one is not necessarily likely to meet people resembling any of Khurgin's characters in great numbers on any Ukrainian or Russian street, but one could perfectly well imagine coming across some of them somewhere. The characters and the social and mental situations which give rise to their behaviour and experiences, are plausible, even if the fullness of their misfortune or mental retardation is not, owing to their hyperbolic nature. Hyperbole, the exaggeration or highlighting of certain traits, is a traditional artistic device that can contain a humorous dimension. In this regard, Khurgin seems to stand in the tradition not just of Babel', but of another fellow-countryman of his, Mikhail Zoshchenko, whose comic characters were 'collective types' that impersonated a number of different behavioural attitudes typical of certain social groups. The philistines of Zoshchenko's stories, however, are replaced in Khurgin's stories by the above described

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<sup>20</sup>Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, trans. by David Magarshack (Harmondsworth, Saint Lambert, Mitcham and Cape Town: Penguin, 1955), p. 499 (Part IV, Chapter 1).



socially marginalised and psychologically depressed characters of the late *perestroika* and early post-Soviet period.

A powerful example of the suppressed desire to live, and of mental inertia, and of the loss of the mental ability of *Lebensgestaltung*, actively to influence their own life and destiny, is to be found in 'Maniakin's Dream' ('Mechta Maniakina') (*Bk*, pp. 202–218). The very name, being derived from the word 'maniac', suggests that there may be something not quite right with the hero's mental capacities. Maniakin is unemployed; his only occupation is the excessive consumption of alcohol. He goes down with a cold, but this marks only the beginning of a long period of serious illness, since more and more diseases affect his body, perhaps as a result of his alcoholic addiction. He lies in bed in an old, cold room with the wind breathing through the window-frames, and with it the spirit of death. Maniakin manages to get out of bed and dress more warmly by putting on a sports sweater. Back in bed, however, he realises that, if he is to keep really warm, he will also need to get a pair of socks. This would require him to rise again and to walk as far as his wardrobe in the other corner of the same room to look for the socks. Since it is so cold in the room, he does not want to get up again, however, and so he stays in bed and freezes to death just an hour or two before his half-brother, Sashka, arrives to pay him a visit. What happens to be a very sad story, is at the same time also a comic one, because the hero's non-action is so stupid. It is a case of tragic inertia. Had he got up to fetch the socks, he might have become warmer and lived for a few more hours until his half-brother called by. This type of inertia, the mental inability to act adequately in relation to a given situation, is typical of Khurgin's characters, and produces a comic effect.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Cf. Milne's discussion of related humoristic effects in Zoshchenko's stories, *How They*

For a closer look at situational humour in Khurgin, let us turn to the story ‘Teeth and Bridges’ (‘Zuby i mosty’, pp. 79–89), which is part of ‘The Country of Australia’. This narration actually has a pre-history [‘An Annoying Misunderstanding’ (‘Dosadnoe nedorazumenie’), pp. 28–38], which tells the mishaps of a Kompaniets, the owner of a company. Owing to a misunderstanding, his subordinate, Ryndich, hits his boss in the face and knocks out all his teeth. At this point ‘An Annoying Misunderstanding’ ends and its sub-plot will be continued a few stories later in ‘Teeth and Bridges’. Kompaniets’s lost teeth had been made of gold. Now, of course, he needs new ones, and during the weeks in which he undergoes dental treatment, he simply stays away from work, because he is embarrassed at being toothless, all the more as he has been struck by a subordinate in full view of everyone else. Having made his last visit to the dentist, he is involved in a car accident in which his face hits against the steering wheel, depriving him of his teeth once again. The police agree that the accident was not his fault, so he receives compensation for both car and teeth from the people responsible. Off he then goes to his next round of visits to the dentist. When that is finished, he decides to celebrate the fact by washing his teeth in cognac and downing a meal in a restaurant, having waited the requisite two hours for the implant materials to harden. After this, he goes home, but is ambushed on the staircase and beaten unconscious. When he wakes up and manages to reach his flat, he discovers that his new (and presumably gold) teeth have been stolen. Moreover, his wife Liudmila has finally had enough of him and announces her decision to leave him. Not knowing what to do, he visits the factory, but finds only official seals in place on the entrance. So he calls Ryndich from a phone booth and is told that during his absence, the company

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*Laughed*, pp. 1–125.

has gone bankrupt. In despair, he wishes he had a gun to shoot himself.

The characteristic humour in this story is generated by Kompaniets being repeatedly hit by the same streak of bad luck, as well as by the mechanical repeat performances of his responses, namely his visits to his dentist. The story reminds the reader of a *van'ka-vstan'ka*, or a 'jack-in-the-box', a little toy figure held on a coil spring in a box, as discussed in Chapter 4 (Section 4.1.1). Kompaniets is obviously the 'jack-in-the-box' or mouse, whereas the cat is nothing other than life itself. Life plays with him as if he were a lifeless, mechanical object, which jumps up again and again, no matter how often it is hit because that is in the nature of its construction. If one transfers this observation based on a specific story to the level of humour in Khurgin's work in general, one might very well be tempted to take the *van'ka-vstan'ka* or cat-and-mouse game as the overarching metaphor of his fiction.

The characters in Khurgin's stories, as pointed out earlier, seem helpless when confronted by fate; they have lost their autonomy so that life just seems to play with them. Even though the outcomes are pathetic, the reader derives amusement from them, but not without also developing sympathy for them. This is achieved, as seen earlier, through the implied author's strategy of allowing the reader to share in the inner workings of his characters' minds through what sometimes appears to be, by way of stylisation, a sincere wearing of the character's socio-psychological 'mask'. As a result, the tragedy of human beings who have lost their bearings, their desire to live, and thereby their dignity, is presented with an ultimately life-affirming perspective. As in the works of Dostoevsky, Khurgin's stories reveal that the implied author engages with his heroes, and takes them seriously.<sup>22</sup> Bakhtin wrote in *Author*

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<sup>22</sup>Cf. Kabakov, 'Garmoniia modnogo tsveta' (para. 10 of 12); N. L. Slobodian-iuk, 'Problema "ia" i "drugoi" s točki zreniia russkogo ekzistentsializma (Semen Frank i Aleksandr Khurgin)', *Vestnik Kyrgyzsko-Rossiiskogo Slavianskogo Universiteta*, 2002.4,

and *Hero* about the author's

loving removal of himself from the field of the hero's life, his clearing of the whole field of life for the hero and his existence, and — the compassionate understanding and consummation of the event of the hero's life in terms of real cognition and ethical action by a detached, unparticipating beholder.<sup>23</sup>

It would appear that the implied author's relationship with his heroes is motivated by a similar respectful, and even empathetic and loving, attitude, one that 'encompasses the consciousness of the world'<sup>24</sup> of his heroes, to borrow from Bakhtin once more; this implicit support for the dignity of his heroes is facilitated by Khurgin's use of *skaz* narration.<sup>25</sup>

## 7.4 Conclusions

In this chapter, we have outlined the key stylistic and thematic features of Khurgin's fiction as being marked by strong affinities with works of Gogol', Babel', Zoshchenko and, above all, Kharms. In the most general terms, Khurgin shares Kharms's depiction of life and the world as void of coherent explanation, both at the level of language and at that of composition. Such a world, in Kharms and Khurgin alike, is inherently comic, given that, robbed of their autonomy, human beings are seemingly transformed into automata at the mercy of nature (in its broadest sense) and, effectively, lose their

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at: <<http://www.krsu.edu.kg/vestnik/2002/v4/a07.html>> [accessed 4 February 2010].

<sup>23</sup>*Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, ed. by Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov, trans. by Vadim Liapunov (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), pp. 14–15

<sup>24</sup>*Art and Answerability*, p. 12.

<sup>25</sup>Cf. Jeremy Hicks, *Mikhail Zoshchenko and the Poetics of Skaz* (Nottingham: Astra, 2000), p. 55.

human dimension. Not entirely so, however. We established in Chapter 3 that Kharms's underlying motivation was, therefore, that of suggesting an understanding of nature beyond what the dominant rationalistic approach had to offer. Khurgin's stories, which are distinctly longer than Kharms's miniatures, bespeak nonetheless a connatural experience of life as being ultimately irrational and as comprising a metaphysical and moral dimension that evades the logic of materialism, determinism and closed cause-and-effect systems (as for example represented in the philosophy of Ernst Haeckel, whom we cited in the epigraph to this chapter). The implicit rejection in Khurgin's works of such ultimate, rationalistic effects of the philosophies of Western modernity on the view of man explain why, despite appearing to be a zero or an automaton, man is still capable of loving and of engaging meaningfully with fellow man, even if under deprived conditions. The implied author's empathy towards his protagonists is proof of that. In their rejection of rationalism, Khurgin's works are, of course, to be seen on a trajectory not only shared with those of Kharms, but also with those of Dostoevsky, Turgenev, and Zamiatin.

In the works of both Kharms and Khurgin, as in those of Sorokin and Tuchkov, are hints of the inability of many people to understand the world, as they are inhibited by the enormous scale of change that descended on Russia and Ukraine in the 1920–30s and again in the 1990s. The works of both Kharms and Khurgin share the feature with those of Sorokin and Tuchkov that implied meaning can often only be recognised where the level of overarching composition and motif is looked at in addition to that of verbal style and plot and character interaction. Put differently, Khurgin's fiction works by way of connoting and suggesting a feeling of the world as being absurd, more than through describing it. This connoting of meaning, however,

does implicate all the levels of ‘microscopic’ language, ‘macroscopic’ narrative composition, and overall motivic composition: absurdity, the lack of logical, causality-based coherence and the absence of satisfying explanations are features which are replicated at these various levels and which therefore reinforce the overall theme of absurdity. For these reasons, it is suggested that viewing Khurgin as ‘neo-modernist’ may be more beneficial for the interpretative and literary-historical point of view than his characterisation as postmodern.

The fact that his stories contain a humoristic and satirical engagement with, for example, the onset of the rule of capitalist values in Russia and Ukraine, allows the reader to recognise a dimension of social concern. The narrative strategy of allowing insight into the characters’ mental world of despondency, executed by way of *skaz* narration and numerous narratorial and implied authorial digressions, restores the vision of true humanity in spite of conditions that seem to diminish it. In this regard, Khurgin also seems rooted in the long Russian tradition of looking at the ‘little man’ and of engaging with the other, like Gogol’ and Dostoevsky. Furthermore, the fact of Khurgin’s borrowing of Gogolian and Kharmsian elements, amongst others, can also be seen as a manifestation of respect for, and a determination to learn from, the ‘glorious ruins’ of Russia’s literary tradition, as well as an exercising of his own artistic virtuosity and freedom.

# Conclusions

*The first to present his case seems right, till another comes forward  
and questions him.*

— Proverbs 18. 17 (NIV)

We began our journey into the world of post-Soviet Russian literature, elements of which we have endeavoured to conceptualise both typologically and from the literary-historical point of view as ‘neo-modernist’, by referring to the literature’s heterogeneity which cannot but bring with it terminological and conceptual difficulties.

Chapter 1 outlined the concept of postmodernism in two of its most important fields, literature and philosophy. The *raison d’être* of the following two chapters was to venture beyond the edifice of literary critical and literary-historical Russian ‘postmodernism’ in order to see whether what lies behind it, either confirms or betrays widely accepted notions. To that end, Chapters 2 and 3 offered an analysis of how Russia might be compared to the two ‘pillars’ on which postmodernism rests — modernity and modernism.

Chapter 2 argued that Russia has never really experienced Renaissance and modernity in the sense of developing a set of values that fundamentally changed its society and culture. This was advanced as a reason for hesitating to employ the term ‘postmodernism’, given that the latter is, if only by implication, defined relative to modernity.

Chapter 3 discussed key works and features of modernism in ways that inform the close textual analysis of certain post-Soviet works to follow in Chapters 5–7. Features identifiable as ‘postmodern’ might be present in works without their being considered genuinely postmodern from a typological point of view, as is the case with Bulgakov’s *The Master and Margarita*. Furthermore, it was suggested that a concern with the world beyond the material and with universal categories of meaning, had remained an inalienable part of the fabric of Russian culture, including the twentieth century. In general, modernism continued, and in fact deepened that tradition. Finally, while Russian modernism embraced many radical formal innovations, it also displayed strong philosophical, thematic and stylistic continuities with both realism and romanticism, to varying degrees, of course.

These findings suggest that in the Russian cultural and literary context, postmodernism is a concept far less helpful and appropriate than might be supposed from the term’s ubiquity in Western cultural and critical discourse. Russia had not experienced ‘modernity’ as the West had, and Russian literary modernism, while formally immensely innovative, was, with its rejection of rationalism and its pursuit of metaphysical truth, rooted in much older literary and cultural traditions. Furthermore, we pointed to the fact that in modernist poetics, the deeper underlying meaning often cannot be deduced from narratological analysis of plot and character actions and speeches and points of view alone as familiar from romanticist and realistic fiction. Rather, it requires examination at the larger ‘poetic’, thematic and metaphorical level — the level of ‘global’ narrative structure and composition, something that is shared by the post-Soviet works discussed in the final chapters of the present work.

To illustrate this, we introduced the concept of fractal geometry as an



analogy: the iteration at various levels of internal thematic and motivic similarity defining the overall nature of modernist works. In the case of Belyi's novels *The Silver Dove* and *Petersburg*, the mysterious and ominous is the dominant motif at all levels of literary creation, including those of style and plot. Through such combination and replication of internal motivic similarity, the mysterious and the theurgic elements of the novels' overall message are foregrounded in a way in which the reader participates in the experience of a narrative world that is difficult to comprehend.

In Chapter 4 we presented a number of literary features that, to varying degrees, figure prominently in the works by Vladimir Sorokin, Tat'iana Tolstaia, Vladimir Tuchkov and Aleksandr Khurgin, laying emphasis on humour and related concepts, like carnivalisation and parody. Later text-based analyses revealed that such critical humour is ubiquitous in the writing of our chosen authors. This humoristic dimension served to demonstrate that the works in question are examples of creative attempts at coming to terms with the Soviet past and the post-Soviet present — whether at the personal or at the collective level. We subsumed this under the general heading of *Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung* and *Gegenwartsbewältigung*. In our discussion of such 'postmodern' markers as pastiche and intertextuality, which therefore might easily be interpreted as postmodern dismissal of the canon, and as superficial, empty play with 'pop icons', we proposed conceptualising such features as evidence of an intentional focus on pre-existing Russian literature and as an attempt to retrieve part of the latter's former scope and strength.

It was argued in Chapters 5–7 that the thematisation of literature and literary creativity that, by way of intertextuality, pastiche and metafiction, characterise the fictions of Sorokin, Tuchkov and Khurgin, is informed by such a profound interest in *Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung* and *Gegenwarts-*

*bewältigung*, a coming to terms with past and present, and in re-connecting with the greatness of Russia's past culture. The implicit potential in language towards violence, as well as Russian cultural and historical issues like 'moral masochism' and the phenomenon of Stalin, were seen to be amongst Sorokin's principal concerns. Tuchkov's satire is directed at decrepit moral and socio-economic conditions, but also includes aspects of Russian history and culture in a way similar to that of Sorokin. Khurgin's fiction centres on social outcasts and their psychopathological condition. The works of Tuchkov and Khurgin both feature characters who are governed by their psychoses and neuroses: Tuchkov's characters pursue their pathological passions with implacable single-mindedness, whereas the characters of Khurgin are mostly prisoners of their own mindsets, often unable to take responsibility for themselves, and merely vegetating. Tuchkov's and Khurgin's fictions could be usefully conceptualised in terms of Bergson's and Stierle's theories concerning robotic and automated characters. The observation of an initially autonomous subject becoming heteronomous and turning into an object, either through passion or passivity, can also have a comic dimension. In Sorokin's works such humour can also be detected, though in a less obvious way, since his characters typically possess no psychological depth: they are primarily puppets who act without motivation or purpose. However, in the final analysis, they are technically heteronomous and ultimately comic characters, even if the cruelty of their actions or speech is not particularly conducive to laughter.

The works of these three writers reflect a profound sense of meaninglessness and absurdity, which is manifest, to different extents, at the levels of plot, structure, language and character experience. In this regard, the works relate strongly to the writings of Kharms. While the meaninglessness of life

and the unintelligibility of the world are also thought of as postmodern experiences, it is arguable that in this respect, postmodernism merely continues and reinforces, rather than rejects, modernism. Both modernism's and postmodernism's experience of absurdity is a consequence of man's loss of freedom that has come in the wake of modernity with its revolutionary views of nature and of mankind, framed by determinism, materialism, and rationalism. Russian culture, however, has been more reluctant to embrace such modern philosophical anthropology. We suggested rather that the fiction discussed here is best approached as being firmly rooted in the modernist tradition of Bergson and Kharmis, and in the long-standing Russian cultural tradition of being critical towards the values of modernity. While the absurdity prevalent in the works under study might reflect a postmodern experience of the world, it was suggested that such experience is only postmodern insofar as it is modernist.

In the works of all three writers the reader encounters a presentation of psychological chaos and ethical disorientation. At the same time, however, certain positive implied authorial perspectives are also clearly recognisable (even if only at the metaphorical level, as in *The Blue Fat*). Often, through satire, fable and intertextual reference to the classics, in combination with the use of grotesque and various kinds of humour, the different cultural, historical, social and psychological experiences that the implied authors are concerned with, are, by way of fictional detachment, highlighted and enlarged.

It was proposed that this very dimension of defamiliarisation constitutes the root cause of the ontological hesitation that exists in many of the literary texts studied above. All of the texts studied still reflect certain aspects of the real world, whether these are objectively verifiable as in various works

by Tuchkov and Khurgin, or are based on a more subjective experience as in Sorokin's writing. While a nightmarish modern and postmodern experience marked by meaninglessness, fragmentation and despair, appears to be presented, such a view of the world is not endowed with final implied authorial authority.

On the contrary, in *The Blue Fat*, the implied author struggles against such absurdity, implying the existence of a further, disembodied world beyond the one that is immanent to his characters' experience. The loss of meaning that rationalism and determinism brought to human existence causes him to crave for meaning and unity in a beyond which eludes rational perception. The works by Tuchkov and Khurgin also reveal an implied concern with those who are mentally unable to deal with reality, as evidenced by characters who are at the mercy of their passions and fate, like mice tormented by cats. Through their use of *skaz* narration, the implied authors of these stories often enable the reader to understand the world from the point of view of the psychopathological and tormented characters, thereby facilitating empathy on the reader's part and ultimately an attitude towards the heroes of 'love covers over all wrongs' (Proverbs 10. 12b, NIV).

All three writers studied in the final chapters of the dissertation are highly intertextual: Sorokin uses classical, modernist, and socialist realist styles, Tuchkov employs the classics and other literary sources, while Khurgin is influenced by the modernists Kharms and Babel', in particular. They all exhibit a playful attitude to literature, a feature, as was shown above, which is not exclusively postmodern. Such an attitude is also evident in the works of earlier writers, like Il'f and Petrov, and is arguably the result of an appreciative creative approach to the literary tradition — an engagement which indicates ways of retrieving apparently superseded reference-points of mean-

ing and moral orientation.

The works of Sorokin and Tuchkov possess in addition a metafictional quality, which seems to bespeak a playful relationship with their readers' expectations, as does their use of the grotesque. More importantly, the grotesque is a critical means of foregrounding man's loss of orientation in a fast-changing world. Whereas the metafictional elements in Sorokin's work betoken a concern with literary activity, ultimately viewing literature and its pursuit as a way of transcending the human predicament, Tuchkov's metafiction is mostly a function of cultural satire. We concluded that Sorokin's works are typologically modernist and esoteric in that they are more 'poetic' or imaginative expressions of a kind of theological or philosophical argument, than traditional fictional works. Despite its darkness and bleakness, however, the prose of Tuchkov and Khurgin is more entertaining and traditionally humorous in nature and possesses potentially broader appeal.

The examination of the implied authorial viewpoints in the works analysed revealed them as being far from relativistic or provisional in their implied moral outlook. They seem very much to be rooted in the traditional Russian quest for salvation, concern for the 'little man' and the individual psyche, and the tradition of raising questions about freedom and the history and purpose of Russia. As we have argued, epistemological searching appears to be of greater significance than ontological instability. In the idiosyncratic case of Sorokin's work, such epistemological seeking materialises emphatically in the form of gnosticism. Any ontological instability is better seen as the condition of an absurd and often surreal world, an experience reproduced in the works of such writers, but not affirmed as positive at the implied authorial level.

While the works examined contain certain elements of postmodern style and form, we have suggested that the use of such effects might be con-

sciously playful, and that most underlying philosophical stances are indeed far removed from postmodern ideation. Perhaps it is indeed a case here of contemporary Russian writers teasingly drawing on Western postmodern poetics, as much as they draw on the Russian literary tradition, without, however, compromising the continuous 'higher' calling of Russian men and women of letters. They appear to do so in the pre-existent irreverence of carnival and through holy foolishness. We have referred to this method as 'comic dialectics', in order to describe the clash of perspectives between that of the reader and that of the implied author: what the reader perceives at first as deconstruction is, in fact, directed at reconstruction, a partaking in the best Russian literary traditions. We argued that the implied view of literature and of its purpose in the works discussed is typologically modernist (especially in Sorokin and Khurgin) and/or traditionally humorous (in Tuchkov and Khurgin) and satirical (in Tuchkov and Sorokin).

The reader will recall our earlier discussion of humour with references to the satire and the fable, and corresponding suggestions concerning the implicitly pedagogical nature of such literary genres. One reason why postmodernism would seem to be a misleading concept, is that the works of Sorokin, Tuchkov and Khurgin have a certain metaphysical and moral dimension, that sits uncertainly with postmodernism's rejection of modernism's seeking after the transcendent. Given that the works studied in this thesis appear to revive structural, stylistic and thematic aspects of Russian modernism, the term 'neo-modernism' may be regarded as being more suitable. Taking into account the fact that, for all their elements of exaggeration and grotesque alienation, these works reflect specific cultural and social aspects of the post-Soviet period, 'neo-modernism' is perhaps best coupled with the temporal reference 'post-Soviet'. Future research will show whether such an advocacy

of 'post-Soviet neo-modernism' as an apt concept for certain segments of post-Soviet fiction, will hold true for other works of the period that have not been referred to or analysed in our study.

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